

“Gather round cubs, gather round. Would you like to hear a story? Course you would! So sit down and keep yer ‘lil mouths shut!”

“Powerstriker! Don’t be so rude to the cubs, they’re just excited.”

“Alright, alright keep yer claws in Swiftspring. Anyways, as I was sayin, there was once a lion that had a terrible temper and was astonishingly strong.”

“That sounds like me!” I giggled, “Grrr!” I pounced on my brother Spark, knocking him over.

“No fair! I wanna be that lion! Rawr!”

Spark pounced back and we play fought, all the while laughing. I noticed Fire sitting a few paw-steps away looking at us as if we were both stupid. *He never joins in* I thought irritably.

“Cubs! Sit still and listen! Or do you not wanna know what happens?”

We ceased immediately. Spark and I huddled close to each other, ready to listen to the pride elder – our grandmother. Fire looked pleased that we’d stopped. We were all siblings from the same litter. Although we were all born on the same day, Fire seemed to think he was better than Spark and I because he was born first. Powerstriker gave an unfriendly grunt as she looked at Spark and I. We were shivering with anticipation. I loved stories. Although the old lion looked hostile, I knew that on the inside she loved us more than anything.

“Anyhow, this lion was *evil*!” A smile crossed her worn face, as our eyes grew wider. “He once killed an entire *pride* of lions.” Spark let out a horrified squeak. Powerstrike shot him a look and continued.

“They called him the Shadow Killer. He would sweep through prides, murdering as he went.” She leaned in close to us; her dark amber eyes alight with mischief, “He killed Manes, lionesses and...” she paused dramatically, “cubs, alike.”

Both Spark and I squeaked at the same time, Fire seemed to find it funny and laughed under his breath.

Spark and I ignored him, our bodies pressed together. “J-Just like that? He *killed* them? He killed *whole prides*?” asked Spark timidly as if he simply couldn’t believe that.

“Just like that,” whispered Powerstriker.

“S-so... he’s still out there?” whispered Spark, his gentle blue eyes impossibly wide.

“Of course he’s not still out there stupid!” growled Fire walking closer with a smirk on his small brown face.

Suddenly, a roar sounded from behind us and a huge male lion leapt behind Fire. He gave a terrified squeal as the lion roared again and prepared to attack him.

“*AAAHHHH!* It’s the *Shadow Killer!* Help!”

Spark’s entire body began to vibrate in laughter. I took a closer look at the lion near Fire and realized it was our own father Starmane! Spark and I both broke out into loud, unguarded laughter.

“Attack!” I commanded trying to muster up a roar. We all swarmed our father, even Fire. StarMane was the leader, or Mane, of our pride and he was our father. I batted his tail while Fire and Spark attacked his ears.

“Ah! They’re too strong for me!” he howled and dropped to the ground, limply. Locks of his dirty-blond mane hung over his face, and contrasted his fairly dark tan body. I climbed up on to his chest, my paws the exact same shade of tan as the pelt that I stood upon.

“We have beaten the Shadow Killer!” I declared, again, trying to roar in victory, but ending up squeaking.

“Yay!” yelled Spark triumphantly. All Fire did was let half his mouth curve into a smile. Not much by my standards, but a lot by his.

“Glad you’re having fun Starmane. The lionesses and I are going hunting. Watch the cubs, will you? And cubs, watch him for me,” called our mother over her shoulder as she, Powerstriker, and the other lionesses were leaving.

“We’ll watch him mommy!” I called leaping on his head.

“Dad! Is that lion still out there? Powerstriker didn’t say!” cried Spark.

Starmane opened one of his calm green eyes, then lifted his scarred muzzle, yawning. I struggled to keep my place between his torn up ears as he moved.

“No. Your brother’s right. We had a meeting-”

“Who’s ‘we’?” asked Fire loudly.

“‘We’ is every pride in this area.”

“That means Sunmane was there!!” exclaimed Spark excitedly.

Sunmane was practically a legend. There were thousands stories of the great feats he’d accomplished. There wasn’t a cub within 100 river-paths that didn’t know his name.

“Yes it does. In fact he was the one chosen to...erm...‘take care’ of the lion.”

“What happened?”

“Neither was ever seen or heard from again...everyone assumes they both died in the battle.”

A while later, I’m not sure how long, both Spark and Fire were asleep. They slept too much for my taste. The world is too exciting to sleep away. There is always something going on. Always a new sound, a new smell. Dramas are unfolding everywhere from ants squabbling about a dead caterpillar to the sun and clouds fighting for control of the sky itself.

That left just Starmane and I awake. I was lying down beside him. Spark’s sleeping body was keeping me comfortably warm as the sun sank below the horizon and took the heat with it.

“Daddy, I want to lead a pride when I grow up.”

“Sweetie...you can’t.”

“What? Why? I’m a lot better at everything than Fire! And you always say I can do anything if I put my mind to it.”

“And you can. Anything but that.”

“But daddy! I want to be a Mane like you!”

“You can’t be a mane.”

“But *why*?” I wailed leaping to my feet, my tail swishing in frustration.

“Because you won’t have a mane.” He gestured to his long luxurious mane by shaking it, “But you are the smartest cub I know and you could be the very best hunter in your pride.” He leaned in close and whispered in my ear, “Even better than your mother, but shhh, don’t tell her I said that.”

“Well I guess...but it’s still unfair! Males get *everything*. Look at me I don’t even have a name! Everyone just calls me ‘female cub’! I mean-”

“Don’t worry little one. You’ll be called something when you’re older. Females are hunters and when elders are organizing hunting parties, they need to know who’s good at what, just by their names. Or if you’re trying to become accepted into a new pride, they may use your name to decide whether you’re needed there or not. We don’t know what you’re good at yet so how-”

Suddenly a huge roar echoed through the grass. Spark woke up and raced over to stand beside me, his fur puffed up – making him look twice his usual size. Fire made a terrified run for the bushes. “Father who is that?” whimpered Spark in terror.

“He’s a lone No-Mane.” Starmane answered grimly. A No-Mane was a lion whom has either never led a pride or a former leader who’d been chased out of his territory by a different No-Mane.

Starmane had told us that most No-Manes were ferocious and unpredictable. He said they are not bad lions but they don’t have any territory or lionesses. This drives them to become ruthless in their quests for a pride.

A moment after the roar a young No-Mane stepped in front of Starmane.

The No-Mane was thin, but well muscled. He had a red-gold pelt, and a dark red-brown mane. He was didn’t have the bulk of my massive father, but he looked fast. His pale blue eyes narrowed as he sized up Starmane.

We cowered at our father’s feet. The rival No-Mane roared his challenge again. According to pride law Starmane had to accept.

He roared back, showing huge yellow teeth. I saw a flash of fear in the No-Mane’s weasel-like face, but he held his ground and roared again. I knew my father had fought many battles with No-Manes like this one. I knew partly from scars that covered his wise face and also because of his stories. But faced with this young, fit, No-Mane my father’s years were showing. I suddenly wondered if he had fought too many battles. What if he couldn’t win this one?

“Come on sis, we’ve gotta hide.” I heard Spark whisper urgently beside me.

“Okay...” I said in a low voice, while backing into the taller grass to lie down beside him. Hopefully that No-Mane wouldn’t see us. If he chased father out it was customary to get rid of the cubs of the old Mane. I watched tensely as they exchanged roars and eventually began circling each other.

Starmane struck first. He jumped at his challenger, but the No-Mane dodged and Starmane flew over him, hitting the ground hard. As he was getting up the No-Mane charged at him and began scratching and biting. Starmane shot up and shot his paw at the No-Mane’s chin, claws unsheathed. He hit him straight on the muzzle. When his attacker’s head was down Starmane stood up on his hind legs, stretched his forelegs and

dragged them down the No-Mane's back. The claws dug deep, leaving what looked like blood filled rivers down the No-Mane's back.

Howling in pain the attacker collapsed. Starmane had won! But as he turned away the unconscious No-Mane was suddenly conscious. In seconds the younger lion sprang to his feet. Before Starmane had a chance to do a thing, the No-Mane bowled into him, using the sheer weight of his body to throw my father to the ground. Starmane was knocked off his feet. He slammed to the ground, a cloud of copper soil puffed around him. Then the No-Mane had him. The rival male bit down on Starmane's neck with all the force his mighty jaws possessed. Father roared in pain. He struggled to break free from the No-Mane's deadly grip but couldn't. Seconds ticked by like years as my father's desperate cries died in his throat, and his wise, caring eyes began to glaze over and slide shut. Never to open again. His body went limp. The No-Mane dropped it roughly and sniffed the air.

"Cubs! I know you're there somewhere. Your father's dead and you know what that means. Come out now and I'll make it painless. I can wait all day. I'll find you eventually," he growled heading off in a random direction. Thankfully the wrong one.

When I was sure he was gone I crept out of the hiding place Spark and I shared. "Stop! Don't go out there!" I heard Spark hiss urgently behind me. As much as I wanted to, I couldn't turn back. It was as if I was in a trance. My paws just kept moving me forward. They brought me to Starmane's lifeless body. I sniffed it, scarcely believing the situation I was in.

"Look out!" It was Spark's panicked voice that broke me out of my trance. Swinging my head around I saw the dark figure of the No-Mane looming behind me.

He had a cruel grin on his bleeding muzzle as he growled, "Hello. What do we have here? Perhaps the mighty Starmane's cub hmmm? I think so."

I was frozen, as attached to the ground as the tree we were standing under. I was suddenly hyper-aware of everything around me. The baboons howling and laughing from the treetop, the birds calling each other, even the breeze in the grass. I braced myself to die when suddenly Spark charged out of his hiding place. He planted himself between the huge male and I.

"St-stay away from my sister!" He squeaked bravely, even though his whole body was shaking.

"Oh? Another, eh? Little male, what can you do to stop me?"

"I-I..." he looked afraid and confused. Then his eyes wandered over to mine and all uncertainty vanished. "I said stay away from my sister!" Spark hissed louder, his whole body vibrating from speaking so loudly. He crouched down, unsheathing his claws and pressing his ears flat against his head.

"You're a brave little cub but...you're not very bright. Sorry." With one painfully strong blow of his paw he sent Spark spiraling through the air. My brother's body smashed against a gigantic baobab tree. The baboons howled, beating their hands on the branches, their cackles growing louder and several birds took flight as Spark crashed to the ground. He lay motionless. His limbs sprawled out in unnatural directions. I knew then that if he wasn't already dead, he would be soon. As I stared at

him in shock all of my terror evaporated. I was suddenly angry. More angry than I'd ever been in my short life. The anger and hatred pulsed through me, spreading like a fire in the dry season. My claws unsheathed, I turned slowly toward the No-Mane who was still grinning.

"You'll not soon forget me." I promised him solemnly. He looked amused. It fed the growing fire inside me. I knew I couldn't leave a mark if I tried to attack him to kill, so I decided to do something that would haunt him forever.

Without warning, I rocked myself at his face. I began scratching wildly at his right eye. I felt his blood trickle down to my back paws, which I had fastened to his nose.

"Get OFF!" He bellowed, tearing me off his face. My back feet had been embedded so deeply into his nose that when I came off I took chips of it with me. As I wriggled under the tremendous weight of his paw, I saw how badly I'd wounded him. His eye was gushing blood as well as his nose. I knew neither would ever fully heal. I escaped his grip, amazingly unharmed. He swung his massive paws around, unable to find me because of his eye. I dodged easily.

"Hey sis! Over here! Come on!" It was Fire. As I turned to face him I felt an enormous force hit my flank. I was thrown through the air. I narrowly missed the tree that had proved fatal to Spark. Instead I hit the ground and my left slid painfully over sharp rocks. Everything hurt. I couldn't see anything but I heard the lionesses returning. I mewled as loudly as I could and heard their pace quicken.

As I waited for them to come I thought about how strangely confident I was that I'd live. I knew the lionesses had arrived when I heard the horrified scream of my mother.

"Starmane! SPARK! FEMALE! You monster!" She shrieked.

I thought my mother would lunge at the stranger. But I knew she couldn't attack the male. Not because of fear of losing but it was ritual. All new Manes had to get rid of the cubs of the former Mane. Mothers were not allowed to interfere with it. It has been that way from the beginning of time. Or at least that's what they say.

I could feel pain all around me. Coming from me, from the lionesses, from my mother and from the No-Mane.

There was a long silence. It was broken by a roar of pain from the No-Mane who apparently couldn't keep it down any longer. There were only three lionesses in my pride but all of their eyes seared into the male's one eye. Nobody knew what to do. This No-Mane had been badly wounded by *me*. A cub. And he certainly didn't have the strength or ability to hunt down and kill Fire. Therefore he had no right to be Mane. But then again, if they drove him out the pride would be left defenseless. Finally I heard Powerstriker speak.

"I have lived many seasons. I have belonged to many prides and seen many Manes rise and fall. But never have I seen a predicament such as this. I feel that for this out of the ordinary situation we need an out of the ordinary solution." She took a long breath. Something was wrong. I could smell it in the air, feel it in the ground. Powerstrike continued, her ancient voice laced with pain, "Sunce? Are you listening?"

Though most lions have abandoned you, I know you're here. I know you still watch over us. And I know you can hear me." She took another pause.

I could see perplexed looks on the other lion's faces. What was a Sunce? Why was Powerstrike talking to it? Powerstriker took a long drawn out look at the assembled lions. Her wise golden eyes were solemn and very sad. I wondered why. First she looked at my mother, Swiftspring, her eyes rested there fondly, then to my mother's sister StealthStriker, then on to me. I tried to look her in the eye but I couldn't find the strength to lift my head. I mewled pathetically as my head thudded to the ground after an attempt at looking up. Powerstriker blinked sadly.

"I will give you my life. There will be no need to take theirs. Curse any Mane who dares murder them. These are my terms. Do you agree?"

A moment of quiet followed, for a split second I thought Powerstrike had gone mad, and nothing would happen. But the icy silence was broken by the terrified screech of Powerstriker. Why she let out such an undignified wail, no one will ever know, but directly after there was a loud thud. My Aunt sniffed Powerstriker and then cried, "She's dead.... by the stars...Powerstriker is dead!"

Chapter 2

It was dead silent. Even the No-Mane's steady wailing had stopped.

"D-Dead? How? What killed her?!" shrieked my mother in horrified dismay.

"M-m-maybe the Sunce...what ever it is...accepted her offer SwiftSpring..." whispered Stealthstriker meekly, as if she could scarcely believe what was happening.

"If it did then you," she nodded toward the No-Mane "must honor the... Sunce's... choice. You shall be for ever cursed if you kill the cubs."

"Curses? Curses are senile old lioness tales. They don't really," He paused, grimacing as his wounds began to puss because of the movement of his face, "They don't really exist."

"I have never believed in them myself, but the evidence is undeniable. Powerstriker is dead. If you lay one claw on those cubs, you may be next." There was a dark glimmer in my mother's golden eyes, daring the No-Mane to contradict her.

"I...you...she..." I heard the beginning of the No-Mane's protest and but I couldn't stay awake any longer. I drifted off, not knowing and at that point, nor caring whether I ever woke up again.

“Siiiiister! Get up! Come *on*, you sleep more than a rock!”

I opened my eyes in tiny slits. I was exactly where I’d passed out. I wasn’t dead! Slowly, I opened my eyes wider and saw Fire standing over me looking irritated. As always.

“*Finally*, you’re awake! You’ve been sleeping for ages. I’m talking sunrise-and-falls here! You have no idea how boring it gets around here when you and Spark aren’t around.”

“Spark! Spark, where is he? Is he ok?”

“Um....”

“Oh no...”

“They...they took his body off territory right after they agreed the No-Mane wouldn’t hurt us...I’m sorry sis. He was already dead. He was all mangled up, his legs all snapped and his head barley hanging on his body...” Fire shivered darkly at the memory.

“What do you mean *sorry*? He was your brother too! Don’t you care? All you think about is your stupid self!” I snarled more loudly than I intended.

“Of course I care! But...but I know you loved him more. And, you’ll miss him more sis. I know how much you’ll miss him. Listen, I know I can’t replace him, but I’m gonna try to be a better brother from now on, okay? I hate it when you’re sad, I really do,” he nudged me gently, “Come on, let’s go see mom. She’ll be happy to see that you’re up.”

“Okay Fire.” I stretched and rolled over onto my belly. I got up but immediately a pain shot through my leg and I fell down. Fire jumped in surprise.

“What’s wrong?” he hissed.

“I-I don’t know. I can’t get up.” A thousand thoughts swirled through my mind. What if my leg was broken? What if I could never get up? Would I just die here and starve to death without the ability to move?

“Well...well maybe...maybe if you try getting up slowly...?” suggested Fire, panicking. I tried but toppled over again. I trembled in fear. Lying there on the ground in a terrified heap. I tried one more time, but holding up the paw that had caused me to fall before. So far so good. I placed my paw on the ground gently. It was fine. Then I shifted part of my weight onto it and felt a sharp pain spring up from my paw. The pain went up my leg, onto my shoulder, down my back, and suddenly everything hurt. I yelped in pain and surprise before falling yet again.

“It’s just this one,” I explained to Fire lifting my right front paw and trying to keep my voice from shaking like the rest of me. I suddenly realized how grim my future would be if this didn’t heal soon. The thought made every hair on my pelt quiver with fear. “Let me try one last time. I think I can walk to mom if I don’t use this leg.”

Heaving myself up I began to limp awkwardly toward the scent of my mother. Working with only three legs was difficult; I kept drifting off the course I wanted myself to go in, and tripping. Now that the pain in my leg was under control I became uncomfortably aware of the other things that hurt.

I could feel a deep cut on the base of my tail, which made me suddenly twist my head around to make sure that my tail, which I loved so much, was still attached. I saw it there following me as it always had. I had never been so happy to see it.

Then I felt the pain in my side. My eyes drifted over from looking at my tail to my side. It was mostly scabbed over, but a few tiny bright red bits of blood preserved. They trickled out drop by drop. While I was looking behind me something else caught my eye. The baobab tree that I had watched Spark get flung into still had dried blood from the horrific encounter with my brother.

Suddenly I was seeing Spark's body sailing through the air. I remembered when it collided with the tree. The sound was disturbingly vivid in my mind - Spark's last desperate plea for help, which was cut short by a bone-crunching snap. A sickening snap that had marked the end of Spark's life. He had died for me, saving me...if I didn't heal, he would have given his life for nothing! For no one! If I only had three legs, I would never accomplish anything. I would be as good as dead.

The sound rang in my ears and I couldn't take my eyes off the tree. I suddenly wondered what I could have done. What I could have done instead of standing there like a newborn zebra. I whimpered feebly as Spark's image flashed through my mind. Then I fainted again.

"Female! Female? Are you alright? Oh please wake up." It was the worried voice of my mother herself that woke me now. I groaned.

"Female they think you're gonna die!" squeaked Fire urgently.

"Oh be a little more optimistic will you Fire? How do you feel female?" asked my mother nervously.

"I...I feel," my stomach growled ferociously. "I feel hungry!" Swiftspring laughed heartily then nudged me to my feet. I fell twice before lagging after her as she stalked off to catch us some food.

"Shhh, I see one." Swiftspring whispered, stopping in a clump of long golden grass. Fire and I immediately stopped and watched the master at work. She held her belly close to the ground and slid forward, the movement was so smooth and serpentine. I always admired my mother's grace and skill at hunting. She stopped noiselessly. The impala she was after rotated its ears around as it paused from its grazing. My mother was so still, and her pelt blended so well with the grass, I could barely see her myself. The impala gazed around one more time, before bowing its long neck, and going back to grazing. Then, Swiftspring stayed true to her name, she sprang out of the bushes in a blur of gold; I heard the impala grunt in surprise. Fire and I ran forward to get a closer look, no point in staying quiet anymore, the impala already had a lion gripping its neck, it would make no difference whether it noticed us now or not. My tail flew up in excitement, while Fire watched with steady concentration; he wasn't enjoying it at all! What fun was that?

I sighed, I wished Spark were there. It was no fun to watch mother hunt without my little brother to share it with. My heart sank. Oh, Spark. I looked down at my paws. I didn't want to enjoy watching mother hunt, what gave me the right to enjoy anything? My brother was dead. Why should I get to keep living, keep enjoying life, when he was a cold corpse being picked at by hyenas and vultures. It just wasn't fair. I sighed again.

"Come on sis, Mom did it. Lets go get something to eat." said Fire, running forward to get a piece of the dead impala. I followed him, dragging my feet. The thought that Spark would never eat again hit me. My hunger disappeared. I just sat and watched Fire and my mother eat.

"Female! Come, eat! You said you were hungry!"

"I...um...Lost my apatite mom. Thanks anyway..." I mumbled. I felt a whole lot less than hungry. I felt sick, it was all my fault. The guilt of knowing that three of my family members had died for me over-whelmed me. They died for me and I may have to live my life as useless cripple, it just made me wish I were dead. I silently begged the world to just gobble me up. But the world didn't listen and I was forced to continue with my life.

Chapter 3

Four moon cycles had passed. My tail and side had healed very well. Although they had healed I still had the annoying habit of instinctively looking behind me. For some reason I couldn't place I always feared waking up one morning and my tail being gone.

Although they were healing well, my leg wasn't. Whenever I tried to walk on it the same sharp pain shot through me. It plagued me. To make matters worse, Fire had been driven out of the pride. QuickMane – the No-Mane who had murdered my father – now led our pride. As was custom he had driven Fire out when he came of age, but was careful not to kill or badly injure him.

Fire had gone off to travel in a bachelor group with other No-Manes. The word disgusted me, and the fact that my own brother was now considered one disgusted me even more.

Just before being driven out my brother told me that the next time I saw him he would be a true Mane, and that I would be accepted into his pride, no matter how crippled I was by my leg. My hopes for the future were high that day, but as the spots on my legs faded so did my chances of being accepted into any pride. Not even my own...

Today was the day. It was my naming day. My mother now was now our elder because she was the oldest and most experienced lion in the pride. And was going to test me on my skills as a hunter. Females all had names that reflected their hunting skills so that when a Mane organized positions he knew the skill just from the lion's names.

My muscles felt alive with energy. I had been preparing for this for weeks; nobody thought I could do it. Usually every young lioness is given a temporary teacher to show them proper hunting crouch, stealth crouch, and death bites, they didn't bother with me, so all I knew I taught myself. No one thought I could earn my name. I would show them! I knew I could do it! I knew I could never learn to run as fast as any of the other lions, but I could be as silent as a shadow! That must count for something! I pranced up to my mother. She had an apathetic expression on her face. As the months had gone by, and my leg didn't heal, she had become more and more bitter toward me.

"Female, we know you can't do it, save yourself the humiliation, and skip it."

"No, mother, I want to do this." I said staring into her dark golden eyes. She rolled them. I knew I could do something. In that moment, I swore on the lives that my father and brother had given up for me, that I would be something. Determination surged through me.

"Come." My mother commanded. "Your first test is the speed test. You must run from this log, to that baobab tree." I looked over the path. The tree, it was the same one that Spark had died hitting, the same one that my father died beside, and the same one that part of me died beside. Had she chosen this tree on purpose? It was well known though the pride that the tree brought back bad memories. They would often torture me with taunts like 'O, female look! The big bad tree's gonna eat ya!' or 'Well, they say that we're at the top of the food chain, but according to female, its that tree!'.

That tree gave me nightmares, in my dreams, eyes would burn in its mighty trunk. Yellow eyes, full of hate, and blood lust. It would call to me; the wind would hiss my name through its branches. Baboons would howl at me, Spark would appear, staring coldly at me, bloody and broken, asking me why I didn't do something. Why I let him just die. I shivered.

"You can still back out you know female." My mother said smugly, twitching her whiskers.

"All I have to do is run from the log to the tree? That's all?" I asked. My mother's eyes widened in surprise. "Well, yes...that's all."

I walked gingerly over to the log. *I can do this. Just because I haven't run in months doesn't mean I can't do it now....* My mother grunted impatiently. *Ok, deep breathes, I can do this...*

I launched myself over the log, landing only on my right forepaw- if I used my left at all, my test would be over before it began. I kept running, not as fast as any other lion, but as long as I didn't fall I could make it to the stealth test, and then I would be home free. I kept running. The baobab tree was nearing. I felt sick. The sound it made when it killed Spark rang in my head. His face appeared just like in my dreams. But my eyes were open, his shady figure just glided beside me. Mouthing the word "why?"

I shook my head, in an attempt to get the grim figure out of my mind's eye. He didn't go away. I couldn't take this. I shut my eyes but kept running forward. I was not giving up. I knew where I was going, I didn't have to open my eyes, and I didn't have to see his bloodied face. Have his once gentle eyes sear through my pelt like termites through wood.

It happened so fast I didn't even know it had occurred until I was on the ground, sliding. I must have tripped on a rock; I guess closing my eyes wasn't really a smart move. I careened into a termite hill, how ironic. Dirt clogged up my nose, my mouth and my eyes, the tiny insects scurried out of their now ruined home, also getting into my mouth and nose. I coughed. I didn't want to get up. I didn't want to *ever* get up. My last chance to prove my self had just blown up in my face. I sighed. I felt utterly defeated. I wasn't worth the amazing gift that had been given to me. Life. Had Spark stayed in his hiding place, the lionesses may have gotten there soon enough to save him. He would have been a great Mane. He would have had a mate and cubs; he would have at least been *something*. Unlike me. Destined to live out my life as a burden, a weight. Nothing, no one. Alive but not living...I felt a paw jab my shoulder.

"Was that it?" Swiftspring snarled. I didn't move. I just slid my paws over my face and sat there, on my belly, like a possum playing dead. The dry breeze blew orange soil over my face, and the wind whistled in my ears. It sounded like it was cackling at me. Even the wind knew I was useless.

"That was even worse than I expected from you. If that's even possible. You're pitiful. You have more in common with those termites that fill your pelt than you do with me, or with your father. You're a disgrace to the bloodline," I could hear the disgust and contempt in her voice as she went on, "You fell during your test, and didn't even have the dignity to get up. How am I supposed to name you on your best qualities when you have none? All you have ever done is take up space and valuable food. The only thing that you have that no one else does is your crippled leg. Hobblestep. That's your pitiful name, for your pitiful life!" She was roaring by the end of this and I didn't dare look up into her eyes. With that, she stalked away.

I heard heavy breathing somewhere near by. I opened my eyes to see a figure dash past my nose.

I sniffed the air. What was that? The scent wasn't of my pride but it was a lioness, that was for sure. I stood up, shaking dust and bugs off of my pelt, and followed the scent. It led me to a disoriented looking young lioness. She looked like she was only a bit older than me. She had a deep wound in her right shoulder that looked like it had been inflicted by the huge, wide-set claws of a Mane. She was crouched by the part of the river that ran through our territory, taking a drink. She was shivering violently as blood dripped off her wounded foreleg. She whipped her head around; at first there was a look of panic in her pale blue eyes, which hardened into a dark stare.

"What are *you* looking at? Looks like your no better off than me with that leg of yours, so *stop staring!*" She snarled.

"Um, I'm s-sorry. I was just surprised to see anyone and-"

"Look, I don't care. Just get out of here, cripple." She flicked the dark brown tip of her tail at me in dismissal. How dare this lone lioness boss me around? This was *my* territory after all.

"Hey! At least I have a pride!" I roared.

"At least I have *pride!*" She hissed back coolly.

“Oh really? Pride? Pride in *what*? You’re a loner who’s injured and trespassing in someone else’s territory. You don’t seem to have anything to have pride *in*.” I was fuming with anger now. A stranger had treated me like dirt in my own territory. She opened her mouth; teeth bared, then abruptly closed it and looked down into the murky water. At first it looked like she was going to cry, then her face twisted into a grim smile, and she started laughing. Laughing like I’d never heard anyone before. It was a joyless sound, but not ugly. It was like listening to the song of a mourning rhinoceros when she’s lost a calf. The sound was strange and beautiful. She stopped then looked me in the eye.

“You got me on that one cripple. What’s your name anyway?”

“My name-”

“Wait, let me guess. Brokenleg? Uslesshunter? Umm... Deadfoot?”

“It’s Hobblestep...”

“Wildebeest-eyes! I was so close! Pride names are so odd! I’ve never been in one, I’m Hover by the way.” She quickly opened up to me.

Dumbfounded, I sat and listened. Her mood change was more than dramatic, it was the exact opposite as how she was only a couple of seconds ago. She continued speaking,

“See, all I was looking for was an impala or two, just a quick meal right? And this territory had like a gazillion in it, right? So I think to myself: if I just take one it won’t kill anyone. They can live with out it, and I can’t. So, their Mane catches me stalking one, and the brute attacks me like I was a dirty baboon! Can you believe it? I only wanted a stupid impala! So I got out of his grip, and he’s like ‘if I ever find you in my territory again I’ll kill you!’. *Kill me? Really?* I mean, its just some lunch. What a hot head. Anyway, that’s at least my fiftieth death threat from a Mane so far...I’m running out of places to hunt. And, I don’t know how long it’ll take for this parting gift that last Mane left me will take to heal.” She cocked her head toward her wounded shoulder. Not quite sure why she was talking to me at all, I nodded because I couldn’t think of anything else to do.

“So, anyway, that’s how I ended up here... what about you? What’s with the leg? And all the scars? I mean, for the moon’s sake, you look like you got eaten and spit back out.” Exclaimed Hover, grinning.

“Well... it happened when I was just a cub and-”

“Yes, she was a cub, and she caused the death of 3 lions! And came out of it barley worth the food we let her eat.”

I cringed. The voice belonged to my cousin Stealthspeed. She was my aunt Stealthstriker’s cub. Quickmane was her father. She was born after he took over our pride, and would never let me forget that she was almost half my age, but received her huntress’s name before I did, not to mention that she was better than me in just about every way. But, then again, that wasn’t very hard to do, seeing as I was useless at almost everything, and had the ugliest face, any lion ever laid eyes on. My once un-marked face had scars that spread up from my cheek over my right eye, and my muzzle was misshapen, with a texture resembling the rough bark of an acacia tree.

Hover just glared at Stealthspeed.

“I didn’t ask *you* did I? I asked *Hobblestep*. Why don’t you try getting your fat nose out of other lions conversations?” She said then smiled when Stealthspeed rose her paw over her nose.

“My nose is NOT fat! I’m going to tell aunty Swiftspring that a mangy lioness is drinking *our* water! Hmph, You’ll be in trouble then!” She hissed before running off and mumbling about how perfect her nose was. *Oh no...I thought. Is mother going to chase away the only lion who might want to be my friend?* I glanced over at Hover who looked perfectly calm, and even a little excited.

“When I speak to your mother I’m going to try to get into the pride!”

Chapter 4

My mother came charging down to the water hole followed closely by Stealthspeed. She held her head and tail high and glared at Hover.

“How *dare* you steal valuable water from our pride? Have you no shame?” She snarled curling her lip to reveal her perfectly white fangs.

“I didn’t *steal* anything. I was just taking a drink. And, The water hole belongs to the hippos anyway, I don’t see them complaining.” Countered Hover calmly.

“Why are you here? Where is your pride?” Growled my mother narrowing her amber eyes suspiciously.

“I don’t have a pride. Well...not yet.” explained Hover, grinning at my mother.

“Not yet? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Wow, you’re slow. I want to join *this* pride., replied Hover still grinning, still very sure of herself. My mother looked disgusted, and opened her mouth to speak, but was cut off.

“What’s going on here?” called Quickmane from the top of the sandy hill overlooking the water hole.

“DADDY! There’s a stinky lioness here who called my nose fat!” Whimpered Stealthspeed pathetically when she saw Quickmane descending the hill, “Chase her out! No kill her! No, no, feed her to hyenas!” She screeched. Then quieted down after a look from Swiftspring. Quickmane put his tail on his daughters shoulder.

“Peace Stealthspeed,” He told her, then, turning to my mother and Hover he asked, “Well, what *is* going on? And who is this lioness?” Hover flinched when she saw his face. I couldn’t help but smile to myself. His face truly was ugly. His nose had chunks missing, and a clean cut stretched down from his snout-tip to the bottom of his lip, so that a section of his top teeth were always visible. Where his left eye should be, there was just a mass of skin and blisters. I flexed my claws, digging them into the parched earth, remembering the feeling of giving him those horrific injuries so long ago.

“This lioness has asked permission to join our pride,” answered my mother, respectfully bowing her head to the one-eyed Mane. He doesn’t deserve respect I thought bitterly. Quickmane circled Hover sniffing her up and down curiously.

“You’re not seriously considering letting her join are you?” Hissed my mother disbelievingly, “We can barley feed *ourselves*! We don’t need more weight on the pride.” She shot me a glance at this, and I just lowered my gaze to my paws.

“All the more reason for another productive hunter. You can feed yourself can’t you?” he asked Hover. She nodded.

“But Daddy! She called me fat!” cried Stealthspeed indignantly. Quickmane ignored her and addressed Hover.

“Do you truly wish to join this pride?”

“I do.”

“Do you swear to be loyal, and obedient to me, and to this pride?”

“Sure.”

“Right. Then all you need is a pride name. Our eldest female, Swiftspring, will give you an assessment when ever you’re ready.”

“So I’m in?”

“Yes. You’re ‘in’.”

“Quickmane, you can’t-” my mother cut in.

“Yes I can Swiftspring. I can and I have. Now, Stealthspeed, darling, will you take our new member on a tour of our territory? And Swiftspring, you return to the inner territory with me.” Stealthspeed made a horrified face but was clever enough not to disagree with her father and nodded. Hover grinned and shook some of the blood off her shoulder before trotting up to Stealthspeed.

“So, where do we go first?” She asked light heartedly.

“This way...” Growled Stealthspeed.

“Hey, can Hobblestep come?”

“Psh, whatever. You can be freaks together.”

“Come on Hobblestep!” Called Hover. I uncertainly fell into step beside the other two lionesses. We walked for a while, along our border, it stunk of Quickmane’s fresh scent markings. He must have been re-establishing his claim on our territory when he found all of us. Stealthspeed stopped.

“So, our territory spreads out in that direction, into a bunch of plains which is where a lot of impala, and gazelles and prey like that hang out when they aren’t down at the water hole. Over that way are the Hyena grounds. You don’t go there unless you have a death wish. Its over run with the annoying little mutts. They’ll tear anything that moves to pieces. We take our dead to that place, so that the hyenas can get rid of the bodies. Though I’ve never seen anyone in our pride die, but Hobblestep over there can tell you all about it, isn’t that right?”

Stealthspeed was purposely making me flinch. “Your little brother was taken there right? After he tried to take on my dad when he was just a cub! HA!” She smiled smugly. Rage burned through me. How dare she joke about my brother’s murder? I bared my teeth at her.

“Shut up...” I growled, trying to hold back a roar.

“And how will you make me? You can’t do anything to me. Your just a weak little cripple.”

I glared at her curling my lip up further to show the full size of my teeth.

“Oooo. Scary. About as scary as that baobab tree! The oh-so-frightening plant.” She laughed. I couldn’t control myself. Before I knew it I had launched myself at Stealthspeed and was scratching wildly at her. She kicked me in the chest and knocked me off of her, then pinned me down. I bit her front paw and dug my back claws into her belly, dragging them down through layers of fur and skin. She screeched in pain and bent her head, teeth out, ready to plunge into my neck. I closed my eyes and waited, but instead of the sting of teeth in my pelt, I heard a startled grunt from Stealthspeed and her weight was lifted off of me. I sat up to see Hover standing over Stealthspeed.

“That’s enough wildebeest-breath. I think this tour’s over. Come on Hobblestep.” She said walking past me, I followed confusedly.

“I’M TELLING DADDY THAT YOU BOTH ATTACKED ME! And my breath smells NOTING like a wildebeest!” Squealed Stealthspeed before getting up and dashing away to find her father.

“Hover..” I began

“What?”

“You really shouldn’t have done that...”

“Why? Wildebeest-breath was going to kill you. Or at least badly injure you. I couldn’t just stand around.”

“But...Now Stealthspeed will tell Quickmane you attacked her...he might change his mind about letting you join the pride...”

Hover hesitated, then spoke.

“Doesn’t really matter... I had to repay a debt anyway...”

“Huh? What? A debt to me?” I looked at her confusedly. She nodded, all the light heartedness melting off her face. She looked like she had when I first saw her. Extremely serious.

“Hover what is it?” I inquired, curious now as to what was upsetting Hover so much.

Hover looked down at her paws, then began.

Chapter 5

“Look...You’ve got to understand, I’ve been on my own my *whole life*. My mom was really young. She had wanted to start a pride with my Dad, but he bailed out on her to go find a bigger pride with more territory. So she stayed where we were supposed to live all alone, and had us. She hated us, she hated hunting for us, and one day she left the den and just never came back. My sisters and I were barley old enough to leave the den when she abandoned us. Both of my sisters died after only a few moon cycles. So I’ve been alone all this time. I’ve survived by stealing from others, it never even occurred to me that anyone would actually let me into a pride. But, when I was talking to you...you made me see that I wasn’t living, I was surviving. You didn’t call me a dirty loner, or try to chase me out. You made me feel like a lion, not a hyena or a vulture like everyone else

treated me. Because of you, if I stay in the pride or if I don't, I'm changed. And you have no idea how much that means to me." She looked at me steadily, "I owe you one Hobbs." She smiled and elbowed me in the shoulder. I shyly smiled back at her, still unclear on how I'd helped her at all.

I heard pawsteps of Quickmane and Stealthspeed coming. I turned around to see them. Quickmane looked furious and Stealthspeed had her eyes narrowed and was staring us down.

"HOVER! What's this my daughter tells me of you attacking her? And YOU! Hobblestep! How dare you touch her?" He roared, highly protective of Stealthspeed.

"Quickmane, sir. No offense, but I think Stealthspeed over-reacted. Do you see any blood on her? No. Is she limping? No. Is she unconscious? No. With all due respect, she's making a big deal of nothing." Said Hover calmly, making eye contact with Quickmane, not even a hint of fear in her blue-grey eyes, "The only brutal attack that was going on was from your daughter. She was going to kill Hobblestep." All eyes turned to Stealthspeed.

"She started it! *She* attacked *me*!" Stealthspeed crowed.

"Only after you provoked her!" Roared Hover, the hairs on her neck rose as a low growl escaped her bared teeth.

"ENOUGH!" Bellowed Quickmane stepping between the two hissing and spitting lionesses, "I will admit, my daughter has a tendency to over exaggerate things,"

"I DO NOT!" exclaimed Stealthspeed, her father ignored her.

"So, Hover, this is your only warning. Stay AWAY from my daughter or get out of my pride. You're not a rouge anymore. Act like it." He snarled coldly. And with that he shook out his dark red mane and walked back to the other lionesses.

"But Daddy! She ATTACKED ME!"

"No buts Stealthspeed. Come." barked Quickmane, putting his tail on his daughter's shoulder and leading her away. She pouted but followed. Once they had left Hover turned to me.

"See? That wasn't so bad. Though you and I should stay out of their way for a while..." she beamed, "So what do pride lions do for fun?"

Two weeks had passed. Hover and I had become inseparable. She was the best friend I'd ever had. We did everything together. For the first time since Spark, Starmane and Powerstriker had died, I felt like I belonged. I felt wanted. It was a warm feeling that I had forgotten.

Hover and I sat on a wide rock in the center of the territory that was warming our pelts in the chilly evening with the heat it had collected in the day. We were both half asleep, Hover was lying on her side with as much of her as possible touched the warm rock. I was on the very edge of it, lying on my belly, my left hind leg lazily draped over the edge.

“Hey Hobblestep! Hey Hover! What are you guys doing?” Sounded a deep male voice from right beside me.

I almost flipped off the rock in surprise, but Hover just coolly looked up at the golden lion that stood beside the rock and smiled at him. Once I got my bearings, I looked at him too. His name was Golden. He was the only male other than Quickmane in the pride. He was only still in the pride because Quickmane hadn't gotten around to chasing him out yet – when a male grows in their mane, it is tradition for the Mane to chase him out, if they didn't, all male cubs would overthrow their fathers and take the pride.

“Hey Golden. We're not doing much, just resting. Care to join us?” Mumbled Hover absently.

“Sure I would!” He replied, smiling warmly. I forced myself to move over – a hard task when I was so cozy and warm – so that Golden had a place to sit. He nodded at me in thanks and settled down beside me. My entire body tingled when I felt his golden pelt touch my murky brown one.

Golden was the most amazing lion I had ever met. He was around our age.

Just a little while after Quickmane had taken over our pride, Golden's mother, She-Who-Strikes-From-Shadows had come, and with her, Golden. Golden's two brothers and his sister had all died on She-Who-Strikes-From-Shadows' long journey in search of a pride. Her former pride was murdered by fearsome monsters. I'd only ever heard stories about them, and didn't really believe it. Huge tall creatures that smelled like baboons. It was said they were as tall as trees, and stood up on their back legs, but never came down. Tales are told that they have disgusting squished in faces, and are hairless aside from thick manes like lions. They are said to ride in monsters with glowing eyes that spew the scent of death from their ends.

Other creatures refer the monsters as Hairless Lions, but we want nothing to do with them, so we call them the Tall Baboons. Not many in the pride believed She-Who-Strikes-From-Shadows when she had tearfully told us the story of how she'd witnessed the murder of her pride. She'd told us that they had used sticks that roared and drew blood like magic. According to her, they had had one of their Roaring Death Sticks pointed at her, when they'd noticed she had cubs and let her go.

She-Who-Strikes-From-Shadows had pleaded with Quickmane to let her keep her only living cub, Golden. Traditionally, cubs that were not fathered by the current Mane were forbidden. However, Quickmane had made an exception on the condition that She-Who-Strikes-From-Shadows bear his cubs. She had agreed, and now she was swelled up like a bloated elephant, the cubs wouldn't be long.

Fire and Golden had been best friends, and since I was always with Fire before he left, I ended up spending a lot of time with Golden as well. Not that he ever really noticed me.

He had dark golden eyes, the colour of the wide-open savanna at sunrise. His shining pelt was a deep gold as well, and his mane was a brighter, more vibrant gold. It had grown in nicely, but not to its full size yet.

He was always kind. Always nice. He didn't avoid me like the rest of the pride, but, didn't really go out of his way to be around me either. I wished with all my heart that he would one day.

"So Golden, aren't you supposed to have left the pride by now? I mean, not that I want you to, but isn't there some silly pride rule that you have to leave?" Asked Hover.

"Yeah, I probably should already be gone...I'm pretty sure Quickmane keeps me around, so that if a rival No-Mane tries to take over the pride I can fight for him. And the stars only know how he's even stayed Mane this long with that face of his." Replied Golden thoughtfully. His mane was illuminated in the pale light, it looked as if he was glowing. With the sun slowly sinking into the horizon behind him, he looked like he owned the universe. I was mesmerized by the way the light glinted off his pelt, and created tiny shadows on his face.

"That makes perfect sense! Can you imagine tree stump face trying to fight off a fit No-Mane? HA! He'd be running for the hills before you could say 'Don't forget wildebeest-breath,'" laughed Hover. Golden and I joined in. The fact that we were laughing at the notion of our Mane being defeated was considered an act of treason, if someone who cared caught us we could be banished from the pride. I would never have done it out loud before I met Hover, and especially not in front of Golden. I was so thankful I had someone who I was so comfortable around, and that I could feel totally at ease about acting how I wanted to, without worrying about rules.

"Hey, did you hear? Swiftspring's pregnant with Quickmane's cubs! Isn't that gross? I mean she's SO OLD!" Exclaimed Golden, laughing heartily again. Hover joined in the laughter too. I stayed silent. They didn't notice.

"Aww that's *nasty*!" hissed Hover, sticking out her tongue in disgust.

My mother was pregnant? With QUICKMANE'S cubs? Did that lioness have no loyalty to my father? My brother? They both died at the paws of that horrible lion, and she went and got herself pregnant with his cubs. I growled to myself. Why was everyone so oblivious to what had happened? I mean...we were told to be oblivious, that this sort of thing happens all the time, but I never really thought lions could forget about their loved ones because they were told to...it disgusted me.

"Uh oh. Speaking of that scary old flea-bag, here she comes. I'll go, I don't think she likes me. Have a nice visit with the hyena-heart," whispered Golden grinning mischievously. He nimbly hopped off the rock and walked away. He gave a grudgingly respectful nod to my mother as she approached before disappearing into the tall grasses. Following my mother, was Quickmane himself.

"Hover." Quickmane looked at her calmly, "it is the opinion of our eldest lioness, and I, that you start to take responsibility for yourself. I understand that you have been hunting for yourself, but that isn't enough anymore. We need you to contribute the pride if you are going to live in it. You will take your test, get your pride name, and start accompanying the other lionesses on group hunts. Clear?"

"Yes."

"That's yes *sir* to you."

“Yes *sir*.” Hover growled rolling her eyes. Quickmane looked almost alarmed at Hover’s complete and utter lack of respect. He looked like he didn’t quite know what to do about it.

“Um...Swiftspring, you take it from here. I’ll be marking our territory.” He muttered, then scent marked the rock were sitting on before walking off.

“So, lets get this test started! What do you want me to do?” asked Hover, flexing her claws and sliding off the rock gracefully.

“You can’t be tested right *now*.” growled my mother, “You must be trained first, if you don’t you may fail almost as badly as my daughter.”

I rested my muzzle into the warm rock and pressed my ears against my head. Swiftspring’s words stung. She glared down at me.

“Why are you even still here, Hobblestep? Go away, I must speak with Hover, *alone*.”

“Oh...Um...I’ll go to my sleeping area now then I guess...” I mumbled, standing up and stepping off the rock. I tried not to look at my mother’s face but I could feel her eyes following me.

The next morning I felt better. I woke up, and instinctively went to Hover’s sleeping area. I found her there, already awake. Usually she slept in and I was the one to wake her.

“Morning Hover! So, what do you want to do today?” I asked sitting down beside her.

“I’m really sorry Hobbs, but your mom’s making me train today.” She sighed, “I don’t know how I’m going to survive so much time alone with that old grump. Anyway, it’ll take pretty much all day...I’m really sorry...once I finish all the dumb training stuff things’ll be just like before. It’ll be over before you know it. And, I was thinking, judging from her opinion of you, I don’t think she took your training very seriously when you did it. So, when I get back from training today, I can teach you what I learned. What do you think? Sound good?” Hover, grinned at me, looking proud of her plan.

“Sounds great!” I said, in as light a tone as I could manage.

“Great. See you then Hobbs.” Said Hover, stalking out toward the big baobab tree where training took place.

Even though Hover said everything would be the same as it used to be once she was done her training and had her pride name, I couldn’t help but find it hard to believe her. Spending so much time with my mother, being taught rules, what if it killed the lawless wild side of Hover, leaving just the shell that most of the pride lionesses were... Seeing her walk off, I wondered if the Hover I knew would ever come back.

Chapter 6

I was bored. I couldn't really think of anything to do. So, I just lay in my sleeping area, and watched life pass by. I watched the other lionesses-aside from my mother and Hover-head out on a hunting trip. I saw Quickmane doing his endless rounds, marking his scent. I also saw Golden; he looked as bored as I was. Since all the lionesses were hunting, and Quickmane was out scent marking, that left just him and I on the inner territory.

The inner territory was where we slept, and (if a kill was small enough to drag) ate. It had lion scent all over it, so no prey dared come even close, but no rival predators came either. It was a small area, but a safe one. Each lion has a small bit of territory a log, or under a tree, somewhere with shade, which was their sleeping area. Their own space. Fights sometimes broke out over the shadiest, or the largest ones.

Mine was one of the smallest. It was located beside a large log. The log was rotting, and bugs squirmed all over its battered surface. No other lion wanted it because of the bugs, and the smell of rotting wood. But, if you ignored all that, it was one of the warmest and most protected from the elements of all the sleeping areas. The log acted like a wall, shielding me from the wind. And when the sun was hottest, all one had to do was crawl inside, and you would be instantly cooled. Not that most lions fit, but I was small compared to most of the lions in my pride, and could fit.

Golden was in his own sleeping area. A large one, underneath a tall acacia tree. It had broad branches, which protected him from the sun. He had his broad muzzle rested on one of the roots, and was watching a snail climb up the tree. His golden mane draped over the root, and blended into the sun bathed savanna grasses.

I was tempted to go over to him, it would take care of my boredom and his...but I wasn't sure if I'd annoy him. I mean, who wants a crippled lioness around? The correct answer to that my friends, is nobody, I couldn't expect, even the kindest, gentlest lion like Golden to care for me. Hover only cared because of some misguided sense of loyalty. I decided not to go see him, in case he was too polite to tell me to go away, but didn't really want to talk to me.

I rested my muzzle on my paws and heaved a sigh. Suddenly, a roar of pain cut through the awkward silence. My ears flicked up, and I raised my head, so did Golden. I stood up and another roar cut through the peaceful singing of the birds like a knife. I ran over to Golden.

"Can you tell who's screaming??" I squeaked.

“Yes,” He paused as yet another roar, angrier and more intense than the last cut through the air, “It’s my mother.” He almost whispered, “Come on! We have to find out what’s wrong!” He bolted toward the sound. I ran too. What could be happening? Shadowstrike was a skilled hunter, but what if something went wrong? She could be hurt or even dying! I ran as fast as I could without tripping, which wasn’t very fast at all compared to Golden who was practically gliding across the open grassland. As we neared her I could smell the mixed scents of the other lionesses, Quickmane, and blood.

Chapter Eight

I could hear voices. As we grew closer I could gradually make out what they were saying.

“I can’t believe it!”

“Oh, oh look!”

“It’s amazing!”

“Stop gawking and take care of that one!”

“Yes ma’m Shadowstrike!”

I saw the lionesses weaving their way around in a circle, with Quickmane in the middle, who was looking down. The tall savanna grass covered what he was looking at, though I guessed it was Shadowstrike lying down.

“Golden? Do I scent my son?? Golden?? Are you here?” Shadowstrike’s tough voice called out from the grass.

“Yes mother! What’s going on?” Golden pushed his way to crouch beside his mother. He gasped in amazement, “Oh mom, they’re beautiful!” He whispered. I timidly glanced over the swarm of lionesses.

Shadowstrike was lying in a puddle of blood. But she had no wounds. Between her two front paws was a tiny cub. It was all wet and covered in her blood. Its eyes were firmly shut, and its ears plastered to its fragile little head. Shadowstrike was licking it lovingly, trying to dry it off. Taking a few steps closer to get a better view, I saw that Nighthunter and Speedykill, (Quickmane’s younger sisters who he had invited to join our pride) were licking two more and making excited little noises when the tiny cubs moved, or sneezed, or yawned.

Shadowstrike paused from her licking and looked up at her son. She smiled and licked his cheek.

“Two little lionesses and a male,” she paused, “you can name him.”

“Wow! Really mom??” Exclaimed Golden. Shadowstrike gave a little chuckle.

“Yes really.” Shadowstrike lovingly looked down at the little male between her forepaws then back at Golden, “So what do you think?” Golden looked at the little cub uncertainly.

“Pebble? Um...Sky? Drift?” He mumbled uncertainly.

“What ever you think.”

The cub had dried by now, and its colours were visible. It was a darker, more reddish colour of gold then Golden himself, or his mother. Closer to it's father, Quickmane. It had a with blaze up its nose, but not on it's muzzle. It sneezed, and blew itself backwards, onto Golden's foot. He smiled and bent his head to look ever closer at his new brother. Well... half brother.

“Feather...” He murmured, then raised his head “Feather, that's his name! See, because he's got that little white bit on his nose that looks like a feather!”

“Excellent choice Golden!” Shadowstrike stood up, “Speedykill, Nighthunter, will you help me carry these cubs back to the inner territory? Everyone else...don't let me hold you up. The pride must be fed. But, do come see us after word, oh, and Golden, would you like to carry Feather?”

“Sure!” He said enthusiastically picking up Feather, who squirmed in his grasp feebily. Shadowstrike headed for the inner territory, followed by Golden, Speedykill and Nighthunter. The other lionesses gossiped together, and headed out to the outer territory, where the prey mostly stayed. Leaving Quickmane who mumbled something like “Why didn't I get to name the cub?” Then stalked off to do who-knows-what. I headed for the inner territory, back to my sleeping area. I mean, I wanted to go see the cubs, but I decided to give Shadowstrike some time to rest.

“Hobbs!”

I woke up from my nap to the sound of my name.

“Hobbs!!”

I blinked my eyes open and yawned.

“Good your awake. Get up!”

“Wha...?”

“Oh come on. I go for one day and you forget who I am?? It’s Hover! Come on Hobbs!”

I yawned again and opened my eyes wider. My vision cleared to see Hover standing over me with an impatient expression on her face. Her dark brown eyes looked down at me like I was just a cub who had misbehaved.

“Where are we going?”

“Remember? I said I’d teach you what I learned in how-to-be-brainless class. So come oooooon! Lets go!”

I stood up and stretched.

“Ok. Sure. Let’s go.”

“Great! Ok, so I was thinking, you know that big patch of useless land on our territory? The one that the prey ate all the food off, so its just basically dirt?”

“Yea.”

“So, I say that can be where we meet after I get back from training every day. Sound good?”

“Sure.”

“Man, you seem tired!”

Come to think of it I WAS tired. REALLY tired. That wasn’t normal, not at all. And, I couldn’t focus, on anything...I felt like I should remember something...like my mind was trying to tell me something...but I couldn’t grasp it. It was like a distant echo...no, a memory of an echo...so faint...yet it seemed important that I found out what it was...I shook the troubling thoughts out of my head. Hover looked a little concerned and changed the subject.

“So, I hear Shadowstrike had cubs! That’s really cool! Sucks that I missed it. Your stupid mom wouldn’t let me go check it out. Hmph. But I did go to see them after training! They are SO cute! Especially Feather. He’s so sweet.”

“Yea. I didn’t really get that close to them...” I mumbled.

“You all right Hobbs?”

“Yea. I’m fine. So, teach me.”

Hover grinned, and we began.

Chapter Nine

Another two weeks had passed. Hover had kept her promise, and had been teaching me what my mother, Swiftspring taught her, but modifying it to suit someone who could only use three legs. I had a pretty good stealth crouch now, and could manage a run without tripping all over myself. But, I don't think I could hunt yet. I needed more practice. And, even if I could creep up on prey, and jump on it, how was I supposed to hold the stupid thing down if I could only use one of my front legs?

"Hey Hobbs, see that lioness over there?" Asked Hover quietly as we were walking to the training area. We often walked there together in the mornings, then would part ways when we got to the baobab tree where my mother waited.

The sun was barley up and each blade of golden grass cast long shadows, as the shadows over lapped, it looked like our home was a giant black spider web.

"See her?" Hover asked again.

I looked over to where Hover was pointing her nose. A pale cream coloured lioness sat under a broad Yellow Fever tree. Her name was Silentsneak. I recognized her as Stealthspeed's younger sister. I'd never really spoken to her. She seemed a lot nicer than her older sister. Before Hover came, she had almost seemed friendly. She would smile at me, or jab her sister's side when she went overboard with the insults. But now, she was just another pair of narrowed eyes.

"Yea, that's Silentsneak. So? What about her?"

"She's been throwing these GLARES at me! It's creeping' me out Hobbs!"

Taking another glance at Silentsneak, I saw that Hover did have a point. Silentsneaks dark brown, almost black eyes were following Hover as we walked, her expression was cold, and a little disgusted.

"That's odd! Did you do something to make her mad?"

"I've never said a word to her! But, then again, Stealthspeed did say she's weird that way. She told me that her sister isn't right in the head."

Something about the way Hover said Stealthspeed's name unnerved me. For one thing, this was the first time since Hover had joined our pride that I had heard her refer to Stealthspeed with her name, instead of Wildebeest-Breathe. She said Stealthspeed's name as if she was a close friend, not that Hover being friends with Stealthspeed shouldn't bother me...should it...?

"I'll talk to her if you want."

"You would really do that?"

"Sure I would!"

"Aww thanks so much Hobbs! You're a great friend. See you after training!"

I hadn't even noticed that we had gotten to the tree.

"See you." I murmured. I decided to go see Silentsneak right then, since I knew where she was. I walked over to the lone lioness. She looked slightly curious as I walked up.

"Uh...Hi there Silentsneak!" I stammered, wondering what had possessed me to tell Hover I would do this. I was just going embarrass myself. I waited for a hissed 'what do you want' or a growl to go away, but instead I got a pleasant smile.

"Hello Hobblestep. What can I do for you?" She inquired quietly. She had a soft, high-pitched voice, it reminded me of a tiny bird's call. Her dark brown eyes didn't look so menacing anymore. Contrasting her pale creamy pelt, they looked genuinely happy to see me, and still curious as to why I had come.

"Um...nothing really...I was just..." I didn't really want to ask her what her problem with Hover was, she was being so nice and it just seemed...well...rude. Her warm brown eyes narrowed with thought, and suddenly iced over.

"She sent you didn't she?"

"Who?"

"The loner lioness."

"Hover?"

She wrinkled her nose. "Yea, Hover."

"Well...Hover's not a loner any more you know...she-"

“She butted her way into our pride. That’s what she did. I mean, why does everyone love her?? She’s just a lowborn loner lioness! I’m one of our Mane’s cubs, why don’t I get any attention? Nothing. No one ever comes and talks to me, only HER. Only the oh-so-special HOVER!!” She had started off at a quiet, angry hiss, but it had grown into a roar by the time she finished, she seemed to have just noticed how loud she had gotten and looked around self consciously, then added in a hushed tone “I’m sorry...I shouldn’t be taking all this out on you Hobblestep. It’s just that...oh...I don’t know...”

Why did lions feel they always needed to have emotional outbursts at me? I did feel bad for Silentsneak though. She was used to living in her older, louder sister’s shadow, but I guess she just couldn’t handle living in the shadow of a former loner. I said down beside her. She was looking at her paws in embarrassment.

“If it’s a friend you’re looking for, I’m here. Though, I don’t think the cripple of the pride is what you had in mind...”

Silentsneak looked up. And smiled back shyly.

“I think I’d like it if we were friends.”

Chapter 10

“Hiya Hobblestep!!! Look what I can do! Look, look,look!!!” Squealed Golden’s little brother Feather.

He ran over to the log that marked me sleeping area and whacked it with his whole body weight, making a tiny dent. His sister ran up behind him.

“Geeze Feather, that’s ALL WRONG!” she jumped on the edge of the log, breaking a bunch of chips off, then smiled smugly at him.

“Yea, that’s just ‘cause your heavier sis! Lay off the fatty gazelles for a while! You’re gonna end up looking like a hippo!!” Giggled Feather, puffing out his cheeks and his belly to imitate his sister.

“HEY! You stupid boy! Mom says I’m NOT fat! You just say that because you’re a stupid, stupid, stupid boy!!!” She squealed.

Feather's mother came bounding over, followed closely by his other sister, who looked exactly like a miniature version of her mother. She followed her every step, and acted exactly like her.

"Feather! I told you not to call your sister names!"

"But mom, she was acting all superior! She started it!"

"I don't care who started it, Feather you should know better than to continue it!" Scolded his mother.

"Sorry mom..."

"Why are you here anyway?"

"I came to see Hobblestep, and SHE followed me here." Feather threw a glare at his sister. Shadowstrike looked exhausted.

"Hey, Shadowstrike, I can watch them for a while if it takes a load off you. Why don't you go for a nice relaxing hunt or, take a nap?" I asked the older lioness.

"Oh, would you? I haven't had any time to myself since they were born..."

"Sure! I'd be happy to! Now, go enjoy yourself!"

"Thank you so much Hobblestep!" Called Shadowstrike over her shoulder as she walked away. Leaving me alone with the energetic cubs. Well, two of them were energetic. The third one, the mini Shadowstrike just watched her mother go silently, then took a nap. I looked at the other two.

"I'm bored."

"I'm hungry."

Uh oh...I realized I had absolutely no idea what would entertain cubs. They stared up at me expectantly.

"Hobblestep, how did you get your scars?" inquired Feather.

Awkward question...

"Yea! What ever happened to your leg?"

I paused, wondering if I should really tell them. They seemed interested, it would keep them entertained, but Quickmane was their father...

“Come ON! TELL US!! Or is it something stupid, like you fell down a hill?”

Hesitantly I began. I dived into my story, of when I was a cub, about my brothers, and my father, and how life had been before Quickmane. I told them the brutal truth about laws, about their father, his scars, and of course, me. Their eyes were huge when I finished. There was an uncomfortable silence. Maybe telling young cubs such...unpleasant stories wasn't a very good idea...

“Wow. You're my hero!!” Squeaked Feather, “You stood up to a big lion like my dad to avenge your brother! That's awesome! And YOU gave him his scars!! He always told us that the last Mane of this pride gave them to him, ha, but it was YOU!! When I grow up, I wish I was that brave!” His blue-green eyes sparkled as he looked up at me.

“You were stupid. Standing up to a big lion like my Daddy. You deserve your scars and bad leg. How dumb. Your brother was dumb too.”

“Don't you SEE sis?? He DIED for her, and she would die for him! It's so..so... AWESOME!”

Feather's sister rolled her eyes, and left to go explore the inside of the log in my sleeping area.

Feather's boundless energy reminded me of Spark. I fought tears from welling up in my eyes. And, I suddenly felt tired. The same eerie exhaustion that I'd had the other day.

Silentsneak walked over to us.

“Hey Hobbs. Baby sitting I see? How are my brother and sisters behaving?”

“Um, they're behaving great...hey, could you uh, take over...I'm really tired..”

“Yea sure. Did you stay up late or something last night? You look horrid!”

“No I'm just tired, uh, thanks.”

Silentsneak's dark brown eyes probed me for a minute, she knew I didn't think I was all right. She frowned, but took the cubs and left me alone.

I curled up and sleep came almost too easily. In what felt like only moments later I woke up, the sleepiness still there. Hanging over me like a cloud. I looked at the horizon, and to

my surprise, the sun was already sinking into the horizon, I yawned, and went to go meet Hover. I was late a lot, she would understand. I stretched and headed out to the bare patch of territory. It was empty. That was ok. Hover was probably just late. I waited. And waited. And waited. I look up, the moon was at its high point in the sky, and it was midnight. Still no Hover. I heard someone coming from behind me. I looked back hopefully, but it wasn't Hover, it was Silentsneak.

"You waiting for your loner friend?" She asked.

"Yea..."

"Hobbs, she's not coming."

"Huh? How do you know?"

"Because she's out with Stealthspeed and some lionesses from other prides. They're elephant hunting."

Elephant hunting wasn't really hunting. It was when a herd of elephants came and stopped off at a water hole, it was fun, or so I'd heard, to jump on their backs, and try to knock them over. It was extremely dangerous, but a favorite recreational activity among young lionesses.

"But...why wouldn't she tell me where she was going?"

"Because you weren't invited. Stealthspeed told her not to tell you because she thought you would want to go. Stealthspeed said no one wants you around, and if you came, it would ruin everybody's night."

"But...Didn't Hover object? She doesn't think no one wants me around...does she?"

"She didn't object, she AGREED! That back stabbing loner... she said that you would just drain the fun out of it! And that your leg would hold everybody back!"

"Hover wouldn't do that! She's not like that! Besides, how do you know all this?? How do I know you're not lying, because you don't like Hover!"

"Hobbs, I'm not lying. True, I don't like that loner, but, I wouldn't make things up about her! And I know because...well I was there. I went with them, then I realized that my true friend was out her, waiting all alone in the dark for that back stabbing loner!"

No. Hover was my friend. And, if they didn't want me, I wouldn't have insisted on going, Hover KNEW that. She could have at least told me she wouldn't be coming to bare patch

of territory, so I wouldn't wait out there all night like an idiot. I didn't know what to believe. Something in the way Hover had talked about Stealthspeed, made me think Silentsneak was telling the truth. I mean, ok, it wasn't the worst thing in the world to sit out here all night, but Hover agreeing that no one wanted me around...it hurt me. I felt stupid, I shouldn't care. But...I did...

"I'm really sorry I didn't come and tell you sooner. You must be freezing. Come on. Lets get back to the inner territory."

I followed Silentsneak, the cloud of tiredness weighing down on me. And I got to sleep even faster than the time before.

I woke up to a prod in the shoulder.

"Morning Hobbs!" Exclaimed Hover cheerily.

I sat up.

"Good Morning Hover..."

"What's wrong?"

"You didn't show up yesterday."

"Oh, yea, I was out Elephant Hunting with Stealthspeed and some other lionesses, oh it was so much fun we-"

"Hover I was waiting out in the bare patch all night! Couldn't you have told me where you were going??"

Hover paused.

"Hey, calm down there. You sound like my mother! Geeze. Why do I have to tell you ever detail of my life??"

"Well you could have spared me a night sitting out in the cold!"

"I thought you'd have the brains to realize I wasn't coming! Apparently not!"

Did she just insult my intelligence? It really wasn't like Hover to make mean remarks like that...

“You’re taking the whole thing too seriously!!” She continued but, I wasn’t listening anymore.

I was lost in my own world. I’d never, not EVER been in a fight with Hover. I was silent as she stormed off. I didn’t even know why she was angry. I was the one who had a right to be mad, but all I felt was a loss. Hover was the best friend I’d ever had, a probably ever will have...and I didn’t think our friendship would survive.

After Hover was gone, I got up, and to my own surprise, followed her to the tree. I hid behind a bush, and watched her train. I saw the way my mother congratulated her, the way they smiled together, and they looked almost like mother and daughter. I suddenly knew what was happening, why Hover was changing. She’d found a family. I could see my mother, molding her into the daughter she’d never had. Hover had never had that, and being with Stealthspeed, she must feel like she got her sister back, but the more Hover hung around me, the farther away her new family got. I wasn’t part of it. I was the outcast, she had fallen in love with her newfound family. Leaving me in the dust. I couldn’t blame her. She’d never had a family, not really. She’d been on her own so long. I felt no anger toward her. I was happy that she was happy.

I was heading back to my sleeping area when Golden called me.

“Hobbs! Hey! Guess what!”

“What?”

“I picked up your brother’s scent around here! Along with a bunch of other No-Manes! He must be in a bachelor group! Wanna go check it out?”

A bachelor group was a group of No-Manes who banded together for company. To keep from going mad like the lone ones do. Of course, bachelor groups weren’t permanent like prides. They were just there until each member found their own pride.

“Oh, that sounds great! I’ve missed Fire so much!!” I forgot about Hover. Completely. I hadn’t seen Fire in SO LONG! I waved my tail around in the air

“Lets go!”

As I Golden led me to where he had picked up the scent, I heard tiny paw steps behind me. I looked back, and there was Feather.

“Feather what are you doing??”

“I want to meet Fire! I’m gonna call him a coward and scratch him!”

Golden and I exchanged an amused glance.

“I don’t think there’s any harm in bringing him.” Said Golden smiling at the little cub.

We set off again, and followed the scent. It got stronger and stronger, and we found a group of about five No-Manes. I scanned through them for my brother, most of their backs were turned, I couldn’t tell...

“Sis!!” I heard, and my eyes focused on one who turned around and bounded over. “Hey sis!! I’m so glad to see you! And Golden!! Hi!!” Fire was grinning a huge grin, how rare! He nuzzled us both in greeting.

He looked totally different. His dark sand coloured pelt was marked up with battle scars, and he had a full mane now. It was thin, and not huge, but handsome nonetheless. It was a reddish-brown colour, very bright, and it shone in the sunlight. The other No-Manes crowded around us.

“Guys, this is my sister, and my best friend Golden!”

“What’s your sister’s name?”

“Uh...sis...?”

I smiled, I hadn’t seen him in so long that I didn’t have a name the last time.

“Hobblestep.”

“I’m Sixtoes, great to meet you Hobblestep!!” exclaimed the No-Mane who had asked. He was a dark tan colour, with a mane of dark brown. He had white paws, and on each, six toes. He looked like he was the youngest of the group. I laughed.

“What happens when you get a pride? Sixtoesmane?? Doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue!” I giggled.

“Good point... I suppose I’ll stick with Sixmane. Toemane just makes me think of feet...”

I laughed again. Another No-Mane stepped forward.

“Hey, I’m Rusty. Nice to meet you both.” Said a reddish one shyly. His pelt was the exact same shade as his mane, she he just looked like he had really long fur.

“I’m his brother Shadow.” Said the lion beside him. The last lion stayed silent. His dark yellow eyes were slowly looking around at the territory. They looked calm, and intelligent. The exhaustion hit me like a brick when I looked at him. What was WRONG with me?

“That’s Proud. He’s the oldest one here.” Whispered Sixtoes to me, nodding toward the yellow eyed silent one when Golden and Fire stepped away from the group to catch up. “He has THE WORST temper. I hope the hot head gets a pride soon!”

Feather was asking all sorts of questions to Rusty and Shadow, they must have said something funny because he fell down laughing, and rolled into Proud’s paw, Proud unsheathed his claws and Feather rolled into it, the claw sliced a cut into his back.

“OW OW OWWWWWW!” He howled. I ran over and licked his wound.

“Are you all right feather?”

“That mean lion cut me!! It HURTS!”

“Proud! It’s just a cub! What did you do that for?!” Roared Sixtoes aggressively.

“I guess it slipped.” Said Proud, calmly, he had a strange monotone voice, it creeped me out. He shoot out his yellow-orange Mane, and bent down to Feather’s level. “Sorry” He hissed, something about his tone sent shivers up my spine.

“Come on Feather. Lets go see my brother. You wanted to scratch him right?” I said quickly ushering the cub away from the No-Mane. His yellow eyes followed us.

“Hey Fire!”

“Hey Hobblestep. So how have you been?”

“I’ve been pretty good.”

“Hobblestep, I want to tell you, that, when I get a pride, my promise to let you in still stands. Ok? I wont got back on that. So if you ever decide to leave, you’ll have a place with me all right?”

I smiled at my big brother. Always looking out for me. I rested my muzzled on his shoulders, his mane tickled my nose.

“I’ve missed you Fire.”

“I’ve missed you too Sis.”

“Hobbs.”

I raised my head to look at Golden.

“Yea?”

“You know, we really aren’t supposed to meet up with bachelor groups. Lets get back before anyone notices we were gone.”

“Um...all right. Bye Fire! See you soon!”

Fire licked my ear affectionately.

“See you.”

Feather slashed his foot then ran off laughing.

“Ow! Hey! What was that for?”

I smiled, and headed out. Sixtoes stopped me.

“Hey! No good bye?” He said, in fake grief. I grinned.

“Good bye Sixtoes.” I giggled, he licked my ear in the same friendly manner as Fire had. I blushed. When I looked over at Golden’s face it had twisted just slightly. Was that jealousy? No. Ha. Golden jealous of someone being near me? That was just wishful thinking.

“I really do hope to see you again sometime Hobblestep.” He murmured softly.

I smiled shyly at the No-Mane. It felt like a million butterflies were flapping around in my stomach.

“Hope to see you again too Sixtoes.” We looked at each other, I felt like I couldn’t break his sweet hazel gaze. So Golden did it for me.

“Hobbs, we really have to get back.” He said, stepping between Sixtoes and me.

“Oh. Yea. Sorry. Bye Sixtoes! Bye Fire!”

“Bye Shadow and Rusty!!” Squeaked Feather, poking his little head out of the grass where he was hiding from Fire. And we finally left.

I was talking with Silentsneak a while later. When Quickmane showed up.

“Leave us Silentsneak.” He growled at his daughter. She looked questioningly at him, he narrowed his amber eyes, “Go now.”

She nodded and stood up. She looked back worriedly at me but left.

“My son has a cut on his back, its quite deep.” He growled at me, “When I asked him where he got it, he said a No-Mane gave it to him. At first I didn’t believe him, but, he told me you went out to see your brother, and took him with you. Is this true?” His eyes were burning into me.

“Um...yes sir...”

Suddenly his claws flashed out and before I knew it, he had slashed at my face. Blood poured out of my cheek.

“Don’t you DARE put my cubs in danger!” He snarled, scratching me again in the shoulder, tearing skin and fur off and knocking me to the ground. I wailed in pain. He cut my cry short by pinning me down, and slapping his paw over my mouth. He lowered his head and grinned, the exact same look of cruelty that he had worn when he killed my brother. So long ago.

“You have no idea how long I have waited to dig my claws into your sorry pelt. He hissed in my ear, unsheathing the claws on the paw he had holding me down, and digging them into my chest, I tried to scream, but his other paw was still over my mouth, and no sound escaped its cover. He left his claws in my chest as he continued.

“Oh don’t worry, I wont kill you. Believe me, I wish I could, but that curse, prevents it. So I’ll just have to settle for non-fatal revege. He dug his claws deeper, my eyes watered as my desperate screams never got out of my mouth because of the paw. I could feel my own blood pouring over me. He laughed at me. A horrible, cruel laugh, and he dragged the paw that was now deeply embedded in my chest down, his horrible sharp claws ripping through my flesh I was in so much pain. I couldn’t bare it. I felt like I was going to explode. He laughed harder, louder, he was enjoying hurting me.

“You know, I never would have dared to do this sort of thing before, because I thought your mother would turn the pride against me, but, luckily, she doesn’t care anymore. I don’t think ANYONE cares about you. Ha. For the record, stay away from my cubs.”

He tore his claws out of me, ripping off a chunk of fur, skin, and flesh, I bled more heavily.

“I’m glad we had this little talk.” He grinned, his terrible grin, and stepped off me.

Blood was pouring out of me. I was lying in a puddle of it. I knew that I wouldn’t die. Quickmane had been careful not to wound me in any places that it would do great damage. I hoped it got infected and I did die. Then at least Quickmane would be cursed for the rest of his life.

I had fooled myself into thinking I belonged here. That this pride was my home. That I had friends, that anyone cared. I was wrong. I’d never belonged here. I never would. I would never belong anywhere. I got light headed. I was losing a lot of blood...my vision fogged up, and the world slipped away.

WARNING!

THIS CHAPTER CONTAINS SCENES OF VIOLENCE AND BLOOD! IF YOU ARE NOT PREPARED PLEASE DO NOT READ, IF YOU CHOOSE NOT TO READ, LEAVE A COMMENT AND I WILL FILL YOU IN. THANK YOU.

Chapter 11

A few days had passed. I didn’t dare show my face in the inner territory. I hung around on the outer rims of our huge territory. I didn’t want anyone to see me. My face had a big ugly scab going across it, the cut wasn’t deep, I was sure it wouldn’t leave another scar, but it was horrible and made me look uglier than I already was. I was weak from loss of blood. So, I tried to recover. I spent my time sitting in the shade of a big boulder. I wondered if anyone was worried about me. If they wondered where I was. But, today, I had the strength to go back. I had debated it in my head, weather or not to go back to the inner territory. In the end, hunger made me head back. I couldn’t survive on my own. That was the grim truth. I was walking back when I heard a roar, not far from me. But it wasn’t directed at me. I recognized the tone. It was a challenge, to our Mane. To Quickmane. Curiosity fueled me to go and watch to see what happened.

When I arrived where the sound had originated I found two lions there. Quickmane, who was cowering, in a submissive stance, and the No-Mane that was in Fire and Sixtoes' bachelor group. Proud. He was looking down at Quickmane.

"What says you to my challenge cripple?" He asked coolly, his voice in the same eerie monotone as before. It made me smile to see Quickmane there, like a frightened cub, being called a cripple. I wanted to cheer Proud on.

"I say take the pride, and the territory! T-take it!" Stuttered Quickmane, lowering his head even lower in submission.

"Why?" Proud studied Quickmane smirking. He wanted to hear Quickmane admit he could never beat the big lion.

"B-because I only have one eye, I cannot defeat you in a battle, so just let me get out of here alive. Take the pride..."

"You realize I will have to kill your cubs, and I do know you have cubs, and your females will belong to me."

"I don't care. Just don't harm me." Quickmane didn't even seem to care at all about feather, or his sister, or how about my mother's unborn cubs? No guilt showed on his face.

"You pitiful. You don't care about the well being of your cubs at all do you? Or your females. Look into my eyes Mane."

Quickmane looked up, and as he did Proud whipped out his paw, claws unsheathed and tore Quickmane's neck out. Blood squirted all over the grass, pale pink veins and arteries exploded from the lions neck, and got caught in Proud's claws. Quickmane's eyes were huge and wide, his pupils tiny slits in his head. He made a gurgling sound as he hit the ground. Or maybe that was just blood bubbling out of his fully exposed neck. His head was barley attached.

"Oh bother. Veins are stuck in my claws." Mumbled Proud, unsheathing his claws to the extent, and picking the thin bits of Quickmane out of them with his teeth. He took a glance at Quickmane's bleeding corpse, "Hah. That was all too easy. Well done Proud. No go introduce yourself to your new pride." He congratulated himself, and headed away, looking for the inner territory.

Once he was gone I stepped over to Quickmane's body. As much as I had wanted this lion to die for so long, and even after the brutal beating he had given me only a few days before, I felt no joy. The cold satisfaction that I was sure would be there when he died was absent. I felt sick. His blank eyes trained on nothing. Never to move again. His jaw

hung limply, the fur on his paws blew in the slight breeze, his black claws hanging out. The smell of blood was overwhelming. And it was terrifying to see the inside of his neck falling out. The pale pink and dark blue veins and arteries were all cut at the same place, and hung out of his neck, they looked like worms, but so many... blood still poured out of him, it looked like it would never stop. I jumped backwards when his body flinched. Horrified I ran, back to the inner territory. When I got there, Silentsneak was the first to greet me.

“Hobbs! Great Savanna! What happened to your face?? And, all those cuts, and, why is there fresh blood on your paws?? I’m so glad you’re back, I thought my father had killed you and-“

“Silentsneak, your father is dead.”

“What??”

“A No-Mane just killed him.”

“A-”

“I’m not a No-Mane anymore. Call me Proudmane.” His deep, single toned voice sounded behind us. Silentsneak saw the blood on his paws.

“YOU KILLED MY FATHER!” She roared, tears welling up in her dark eyes.

“That I did my dear. Gather your pride. I must survey my new property.” He said calmly.

Going and sitting on top of a fair sized boulder that lionesses often used to warm up on. Already the pride was gathering, even though no one had summoned them, they knew something had happened, that something was wrong. Within minutes everyone was there.

“Good day. I am you’re new Mane. Proudmane. Your old one was weak. Let me look at my new property. Each lioness step up and tell me your name.”

First was Steathstrike, (my aunt, and Stealthspeed’s mother.)

“I am Stealthstrike.” She said trying not to make eye contact with the young Mane. He jumped off his perch on the rock and circled her.

“When is the soonest you can bear cubs?”

“As soon as you wish it of me. My other cubs are grown.” She said, she had a strong voice, that radiated across the overly silent place.

“Very good. Next.”

Shadowstrike stepped up next.

“I am Shadowstrike, I-”

“You have cubs with you don’t you?” He asked

She remained silent. He narrowed his eyes.

“ I will find them, and dispose of them. After I do that, you will bear my cubs. Understood?”

Shadowstrike didn’t say anything, but stepped back into the line. She didn’t deserve this. Golden’s siblings had died when she was trying to find a new pride, and now Feather and his sisters were going to die. Her eyes stared down at her paws unhappily, and she looked like she was holding back tears.

Golden stepped out of the group.

“Hey! My mother has been through enough! I’ll leave, and take the cubs with me.”

“ It is the LAW to kill the cubs of the former Mane.”

“If I leave with them, it will be the same as them being dead to you. So what difference does it make?”

“No.”

“If you don’t let me take those cubs, I’ll challenge you for control of the pride. Do you think you can beat me in a fight Proudmane?” Golden held his head high, as if he was certain he would beat Proudmane if they fought, but I could tell from the look in his eyes that he felt a lot more uncertain than he sounded. He had never fought a battle in his life.

Proudmane looked uncertain. There was a long silence then, “All right. Fine. Take them. Take them and go.”

Golden nodded. And went to say good-bye to his mother. She shook, then wailed. My heart went out to her. All her cubs were leaving. Everything she held dear was gone. Golden went and collected the cubs from their hiding place in the baobab tree. Under

Proudmane's dark yellow gaze he said good-bye to all of his friends. He came over to me last.

"Bye Hobbs..." He stopped. Was that all I got? Of course it was. I didn't know why I expected more. I couldn't bear to think this was a good bye. That his gold gaze would never warm me again.

"Not good bye. How about, until next time?" I stammered quietly. I saw a flash of affection in his bright eyes, and nuzzled me then licked my cheek.

"Until next time Hobbs." He walked away. Followed by the three cubs. I wanted to scream after him that I loved him, I wanted to go with him, I wanted to chase him, to follow him to the ends of the earth.

"Golden! I'm coming with you!" I called, ready to take off. He stopped, looking back at me.

"Hobbs, don't. You need a pride to live. I can't hunt enough for you, the cubs, and me. Don't worry. One day I'll be back. I promise. I'll be the mane of this pride. Then..."

"Get out all ready!" Roared Proudmane. Golden clenched his teeth and took off. Disappearing into the pale grasses.

"Now, next." Proudmane watched as Speedykill and Nighthunter introduced themselves. Now it was my mother's turn.

"I am Swiftspring." She said.

"You are with cubs?"

"Yes sir."

"Will you be able to have more once after I kill these ones or are you too old?"

"I-I don't know sir."

"Right." Proudmane paused for a moment, and lightning fast sliced open my mother's bloated belly. She screamed and fell to the ground. Half formed cubs fell out, along with guts. Blood gushed even heavier then it had from Quickmane's neck when he had died. She was still alive while all this happened, and was screaming. Proudmane slit her throat, and the screams were cut off, replaced by quiet gurgling, just like Quickmane. The pride was dead silent. No one dared speak, or move, or even breathe. Proudmane looked unshaken by his actions and kept the same, apathetic expression.

“ There. I’ve killed the cubs, and taken the weight of an old lioness off the pride. Next.”

I felt hollow. My mother was cruel to me, she never cared about my well being, but I cared about her’s. I’d loved her. She was my mother. And now she lay, dead, and so did my unborn kin. I felt like I would faint from pure fear. Next was Silentsneak. It was her, then me, I realized with horror. What if he ended up killing me because I was an extra ‘weight on the pride’ as well?? Sure there was the curse that Powerstrike had set, but he didn’t look like he would be afraid of some ‘curse’.

“I am Silentsneak.” She said, her voice shaking in fear. He circled her.

“I’m trying to decide if you are young enough to be considered a cub, and weather to kill you...Hmm you look old enough not to be a cub. How long until you can bear cubs?”

“What? I don’t want to have cubs with YOU!”

He struck her face, leaving a bloody line across her nose.

“You will not address me so disrespectfully!”

Silentsneak stared at him, and without a word, made a break for the outer territory and beyond.

Proudmane let out a frustrated roar. If he chased after her, he would be leaving the rest of his pride unattended, and what was to stop us from plotting against him, all newly appointed manes had to be careful of the wrathful fury of lionesses, especially larger prides like ours. He let her go.

“Next.”

I stepped up timidly.

“I am Hobblestep.” I struggled to get the words out of my throat without my voice cracking, and failed.

“Yea, I remember you. You’re Fire’s sister right? Oh, I can’t kill you. Go find your brother. He was always talking about letting you into his pride anyway. Tell him I spared you. Go on. Out.” He stepped closer, “Out.” His teeth were bared.

I stumbled out of the line. Running at my full speed out of there. Once I was far enough away, I slowed down, looking back at my pride, I saw that no one was looking to see me go. Not even Hover. I sighed, my life as I knew it was over. I may as well be dead. I knew

I couldn't survive without a pride to feed me. I shut my eyes. Appalled at the brutality of the world. It was then that I'd decided that I had to stop feeling sorry for myself. I knew if I set my mind to it I could do anything. My father had always thought so. I was going to live, no, I was going to show them all. I COULD be something. I WOULD survive, not only that but I would live. My life would mean something. I swore it would.

Chapter Twelve

I stood at the boundary of the territory I'd grown up in. I'd never left this place. I knew every rock, every blade of grass, everything was so familiar, I was going to miss it so much...I loved this place. It held so many bad memories, but it was home. And in my heart I didn't want to leave. I took a deep breath and stepped over the border. I took a few more steps. I looked back over my home, my life, then broke into a run.

Suddenly I heard a tiny call from behind me.

"Stop! Wait up!"

I stopped. I heard the sound of tiny paws running after me. I turned around. It was Golden's little brother Feather.

"Feather! What are you doing?? Why aren't you with Golden??"

"I like you better."

"FEATHER! Where is he?? We have to find him!!"

"He's long gone Hobbs. He went the other way."

"Feather, I can't feed us both! I don't even know how to hunt! This is terrible!"

"Y-you don't WANT me with you?" Feather's eyes were all wet, it looked like I'd hurt his feelings.

"No, no Feather, of course I want you here but--"

"Yay!! So where are we going?"

That was a quick recovery.

"We are going to try to find your brother. I told you, I can't take care of you."

“But Hobbs you CAN’T. He went the other WAY. And the only way to get back that way fast enough to catch up to him is to back through the old territory, and if you do that Proudmane will KILL you. And me.”

“What? How do you even know that?!?”

“I’m smarter than I look.” Squeaked the little cub, trying to look dignified.

But, when I thought about what he said, it did make sense. If I tried going around the territory, Golden would be long gone, there would be no hope of finding him. And if I went through the territory, Proudmane would certainly kill me. I dug my claws into the ground in frustration. How was I supposed to even keep this cub alive?? I couldn’t hunt! I sighed.

“Then if there is no hope of finding your brother, we’ll have to go after mine. That’s where I was on my way to anyway.”

“Your brother? Fire? But Fire’s a coward!! He just ran away when-”

“Feather that’s enough. My brother is a fine lion. Don’t talk about him like that.”

“But he was friends with Proudmane!! He’s a traitor!!” Said Feather, unsheathing his little white claws. I smiled at the little cub’s passion.

“It’s not a crime to have friends Proudmane probably wasn’t that bad in the bachelor group.”

“Hmph. I don’t trust him. Anyway, how do you know where he is?”

I paused.

“I...don’t...”

“Oh. So we are just going to walk around hoping we find him?”

“Um...yes...I guess...it seemed like a better plan in my head...” I mumbled.

“Whatever. Sounds like an adventure!! Let’s go!!” Exclaimed Feather, bounding forward energetically.

Feather and I had spent a month on our own. I knew how to scare off hyena's from what Hover told me, so long ago by the water hole when she had explained what I had done for her. Hover. I missed her so much. She had been my very first friend, my very best friend, and it was her I missed the most. More than I missed my familiar home. More even, then I missed Golden. What hurt the most was that we had parted on bad terms. I may never get a chance to apologize to her. I didn't even know what I would be saying sorry for, but if that was the only way to be friends with her again, I would have done it. But now she was gone...

Of the little food we had, I let Feather have most of it. At least I was keeping him healthy. Not even one of his ribs was showing. He still had the energy to move, and play. The opposite of me. Each one of my ribs was a distinguished lump on my sides. I was always hungry, but I almost never ate, because there was hardly ever enough food to feed both Feather and I.

Everything on me hurt. I needed to eat, or I would never survive for much longer. Feather used to chatter and chatter like a humming bird, but as I got thinner and thinner, he got more and more worried. When he asked me if I were getting weaker and weaker because he was there, I would always tell me defiantly not. And that I was fine. I knew from his nature that if I said this was happening to me because I was giving him most of our food supplies, he would run away. Feather had become my life. The only reason I kept living, was so that I could help him live, to help him find food. I didn't care about my own life. Feather reminded me so much for spark, I would not ever let the fire that burned inside the exuberant little creature go out. Life outside the pride was hard, but nothing was impossible.

Chapter Thirteen

Dry season was in its full fury. All the water holes were drying up. Feather and I searched and searched. We hadn't had anything to drink in days, the last place we had found to drink was a muddy puddle, what remained of what used to be a fairly large water hole, judging from the size of the dip in the ground which had been filled with water just a few short months ago.

To my agony Feather was getting weaker and weaker. I took to carrying him; because I didn't want him to waste to precious energy he had left walking. I was worried about him. He was usually so talkative, but now he would just hang limply when I carried him. I was so afraid he was going to die of thirst. After all, his body was smaller than mine, so

it couldn't go as long without water. To make matters worse, we hadn't come across any prey. Nothing. We found many bodies. Predators and prey alike were going thirsty. I used to try to cover Feather's innocent eyes when we came across them, but there were so many, that no matter what I did, I couldn't hide the fact that death was all around us.

One day we found a crocodile, wandering the open savanna. It was dragging itself awkwardly across the dusty terrain. Its yellow eyes were staring blankly ahead as it pulled itself along. Its olive coloured scales didn't glint in the sun light, this crocodile wasn't wet. But wait...I looked at its belly. It was tracking dirt, but the dirt was stuck there, and a shade darker than it was on the ground. The crocodile's belly was wet! It must've had to leave its water hole because the water level was just too low to survive in; the poor creature was looking for a deeper one. Since it was still wet, that meant that it hadn't fled its home very long ago, which meant there was a water hole near by!!

The crocodile stopped moving. The poor creature's labored breathing was audible from where I stood. I walked over and put the poor thing out of its misery. Well, this was the most helpful crocodile I'd ever met! Now that it was dead, it would provide our first real meal since we left the pride and showed us that there was water near by.

I put Feather down. He didn't move, just sat there in a heap.

"Hey, Feather, we have a nice big meal here. I hope you're in the mood for scaly." I whispered into his ear. He didn't move. I prodded him with my nose, "Come on lazy bones. Get up."

He was still. Fear tore through me. I stepped back. Was he dead? No! He couldn't be dead! Just when I was about to scream, I noticed the steady rise and fall of his chest. He was breathing. Why didn't he get up then??

I prodded him again. This time he opened his amber eyes in tiny slits.

"Did I fool you?" He said through the corner of his mouth, grinning.

I glared at him. One moment ago I was terrified that he was dead, now I wanted to kill him.

"Yes you fooled me..." I growled.

He got up shakily, and stretched.

"That was a good one eh? Geeze, you were SO afraid! Ha." He said smiling for the first time in quite a while. It was good to see that carrying him was doing at least SOME good. He was acting more like his old self.

He stepped gingerly over to the dead crocodile.

“What’s a crocodile doing out here?” He asked, cocking his head to the side.

“He’s out here so that we can eat him. Go on, take a bite.” I didn’t want to raise Feather’s hopes about the water. I was pretty sure it should be here, but for all I knew, it could all ready be dried up.

“I’ve never had crocodile before...you didn’t find it dead did you? I don’t want to eat anything rotten...”

“No Feather, I killed it. Now come on! Do you want to eat or not?”

Feather sniffed it, and wrinkled his nose. He reached down and pulled a scale off, then spit it out.

“How are you supposed to eat it?” He asked.

Well how was I supposed to know? Up until now, I’d always thought a crocodile would eat me, not the other way around. I studied it. It had tough scales on its back, and along its sides, but on its belly, the skin looked easy to pierce through, and easy to get at the meat. I flipped to crocodile over and dusted off the dirt. I took a bite.

“That way.” I replied through a mouthful of it.

“Cool!” Feather tore hungrily away at the carcass. For once there was enough for both of us. I was fully fed, and so was he. And soon we would have water...

We slept there that night. The next morning we got up, and I began trying to scent water, or find any signs of where it was.

“So where’s the water?” Asked Feather, who had refused to let me carry him, and walked beside me.

“What water?” How did he know there was water??

“I’m not stupid Hobbs! That croc’s belly was wet! That means there’s WATER!” He exclaimed excitedly waving his little tail in the air.

“You’re too smart for your own good Feather.” I told him smiling.

“Yea, yea what ever. Where IS it? I’m so thirsty I could drink a lake!”

“I’m not sure...”

“Why don’t you ask them? They look like they’re from around here.” Feather nodded his head toward a cheetah and her cubs, who were gathered around a gazelle body.

“Good idea Feather.”

I strode toward them.

“Excuse me-” I began.

The female cheetah turned around and her face twisted into a snarl.

“Run! Dapple, Chase, GO! Lions!” She hissed urgently to her cubs. Both of them turned around, one had a disfigured face, and he squeaked in fear, then got dragged away by his sister. They ran faster than any lion could ever hope to.

Their mother turned her hostile brown gaze on me.

“You should be ashamed of yourself! You lions think you own everything, well what about us!? I hope you all die of thirst!” She hissed, her fur puffed out, “Where’s the rest of your blood thirsty, prey stealing, pride?”

“You don’t understand I’m not trying to steal your kill, I just want-”

“Oh, you don’t want my prey you just WANT something else? Well you can’t just take everything from us! What if I don’t give you what you WANT? What then? Will you kill me? Go after my cubs? That’s what your kind did last time! My little Strike was killed because I refused to give up my prey! You disgust me!”

“No, please, you misunderstand me. I just need-”

“Oh so now its NEED is it!? Well-”

“SHUT UP FOR A SECOND AND LISTEN TO HER!” Roared Feather, stepping confidently out of the bushes.

The cheetah was silent for just a moment while she looked at Feather curiously.

“Weneeddirectionstothenearestwaterholebecauseyouseewefoundthiscrocodileandthinkthat thereiswater nearbybecausehisbellywasstillwet!” I explained, all in one breath. The cheetah looked at me strangely.

“What..?”

Good. Now I could speak normally.

“We need directions. We don’t have a pride, we aren’t trying to steal your kill, we just found a crocodile who’s belly was still wet, and thought that might mean there was a water hole near here...we really need the water, please, will you tell us where it is?”

The cheetah narrowed her eyes.

“Why should I tell you?”

“Because you know what it’s like to lose a cub. Well, I don’t want to lose Feather, he’s the cub, and he really needs a drink.”

The cheetah’s expression softened. And her fur finally lay flat.

Looking up from Feather, to me she said,

“Well there IS a water hole near here, but its very shallow. It used to be quite large, and was home to many crocodiles. But now that it’s dried up, they all just huddle in the little water there is left. It’s too dangerous to drink from. They are everywhere. If you want to see for yourself it’s due east from here.” She said, her brown eyes still narrowed at me.

“Thank you. And I’m sorry about your cub.”

She hissed at me.

“Don’t talk about my cub. It was your kind that killed him. Now get out of here, leave us in peace.”

I nodded and headed east. Feather trotted behind me, glancing back at the cheetah, who watched us go with hostility.

When we finally reached the water hole, I knew that the cheetah wasn’t exaggerating. There were crocodiles piled on top of each other, trying to keep themselves wet, it was just a moving mass of reptiles. I watched them feebly fighting amongst themselves. The cheetah was right. It was too dangerous to even attempt to drink here. We would be killed in a second.

“I’m sorry Feather, we can’t drink here. We’ll have to find somewhere else.” I murmured. When I got no response, turned my head to look at him, but he was gone. I got to my feet.

To my absolute horror, I saw Feather running toward the mass of crocodiles.

Chapter Fourteen

To think that a few hours ago I thought that cub was smart. But his thirst must have been making him desperate.

Without thinking I leapt out of my hiding place, in my panic, I forgot all about my injury, and landed on just one front paw, got unbalanced and fell. My muzzle slid across the ground and the wind was knocked out of me. No, No No! I thought. Not now! Feather was in danger!

I staggered to my feet, gasping for air, and kept running toward the cub, who had a huge head start. I felt the soil grow damp under my paws. I ran with my claws digging into the ground, and unsheathing as I lifted my feet so that I wouldn't slip and fall again.

The water was now almost up to my ankles, higher on Feather's tiny body, making him slower than me. Ahead of me Feather stopped. He joyfully dipped his head under the murky water and lifted it back up, shaking the muddy droplets out of his fur. He bent down and took a sip of the precious substance.

The crocodiles noticed him. One of them broke off from the huge group gathered in the deeper water and slithered toward Feather stealthily, its yellow-orange eyes trained on the unsuspecting cub.

My heart beat hard in my chest. I ran to Feather, and yanked him out of the water, mid drink. There was no time to run through the water, I might slip and fall, condemning us both to be killed by the deadly reptile. I threw Feather as far as I could in the direction of the shoreline. When I turned to face the crocodile, I saw that three more had noticed my presence, and in their serpent-like manner, were moving toward me. I took a step backwards, my back paw slid in the mud, and I struggled to keep my balance. I turned to run, but there were more, silently stalking toward me, blocking my path to the shore, to safety.

I saw Feather; panic was all over his face.

"Hobblestep!" He screamed, his pelt puffed out.

One of the crocodiles snapped its jaws loudly, and another two began making low hissing noises. There was no way out. They were surrounding me on all sides. I took in a shaky

breath and clenched my jaw, waiting for one of them to grab a hold of my neck, and drag me out into deeper water, like I'd seen them do to prey so many times. I remember the look on the prey's face, as it would be yanked under water, never to feel the warmth of the sun again. I didn't want that to be me. I wanted to go out fighting. I unsheathed my claws and waited for one to attack.

Sure enough there was a very loud hiss from behind me, and one of them had a sudden burst of speed and launched its self at me. I whipped my paw under its jaw, where the soft skin of its under belly was. The creature fell to the ground, its blood creating a cloud of red in the shallow water. A chorus of hisses burst from the other crocodiles. All of them attacked at the same time now. One clamped its jaws around my leg – the bad one – and another, onto my right back leg. I roared in pain, together they pulled me downward, I roared in pain, and another one clamped its jaws on my belly, pulling me all the way to the ground. I heard the sound of others edging closer as I struggled to break free. I knew that blood was steadily flowing out of each of the places where the crocodiles held their deadly grips. As more of them piled onto me, my face was pushed under water, I couldn't breath! One tore at my side, and I felt the worst pain that I had ever, and would ever know. I tried to scream, but the water drowned it out, all that happened was bubbles formed around my face. The sounds of above water were blurry but I heard Feather's voice, say something like

"Get away from her!" I heard muffled splashing, then another voice, a female voice. It was snarling and hissing.

I wondered what was going on. But the sounds began to fade, and so did the murky scene of the water around me. Fading to black. To the sweet embrace of nothingness.

Chapter Fifteen

I floated in the nothingness. I had a sense of freedom. No more pain, no more injuries holding me back. Just...nothing.

Suddenly I felt a pull at the edge of my mind. Was that worry? But, it was so peaceful here...in the expanse of freedom, of quiet. I felt the pull again, and the nothingness faded. I wanted to stay there, why was it going away? Gradually a white light replaced it.

I blinked my eyes painfully in the glare.

"Where did it go??" I cried out loud.

"Its not your time yet." I heard a voice say. I knew that voice. From so long ago...it was familiar. The voice stirred feelings of joy and happiness inside me, I didn't know why...

“W-who said that?” I asked, glancing around the incredibly bright place. I saw a figure walking toward me. He had a huge mane; it was a pale gold, with brown streaking through it, and a little tiny bit of grey at the edges. His face was all scarred. I knew how each and every single one got there.

“DADDY!” I squealed, running up to him. Wait, running? My leg was healed!

“Your leg is only healed her Hobblestep. You will still have to bear its burden in the real world.” He said calmly, seemingly reading my mind.

My father nuzzled me affectionately and I drew in the scent that I had missed for so long.

“Someone else wants to see you.” He murmured in my ear. I drew back from him to look around. I saw another male lion, standing a few feet away. His mane was a very pale yellow. His pelt was a light golden colour, and he had kind blue eyes.

“Hi Hobblestep...” He mumbled shyly. He had a smooth, moderately high-pitched voice, and spoke slowly and clearly. I was certain I had never heard that voice before.

I cocked my head to the side.

“Who are you?” I asked curiously. He took a few steps closer. And looking at his paws, gave a sheepish smile.

“Don’t you remember your own brother?” He asked, looking me in the eye.

I studied his face. Took in his scent. My whole body began to quiver. Spark!

“S-spark?”

“That’s me...” He replied, nervously ruffling his pale mane. I was shocked, I didn’t know why. I had just seen my dead father, so it shouldn’t be surprising that my brother was here, but he’d GROWN! He was my age! He was big, and handsome, and nothing like the horrible corps that used to haunt my dreams. He didn’t have any scars, or broken bones, he looked untouched. He could have lived to be this old if it wasn’t for me I thought miserably. He could have been a Mane, and had cubs. But he had died saving my life. Life was so unfair. He had so much potential.

“Um...aren’t you going to say something...?” He mumbled, his eyes darting up from his paws for a moment, and then darting back down.

I couldn’t think of anything to say. I felt like jumping for joy, and sobbing all at the same time, so I buried my face in his huge yellow mane and just took in his scent.

“I’ve missed you so much Spark...” I whispered shakily, trying not to cry. He nuzzled me back.

“I’ve missed you too sis.” He replied solemnly. Then, letting his voice take on a lighter tone he said, “Heh, for a minute I thought you wouldn’t forgive me...”

I scrunched up my nose.

“Forgive you for what?”

“Dying. Not being alive to protect you from all the things you’ve gone through. If I had lived I would have been there for you sis. You wouldn’t have had to put up with all the crap everyone gave you. So many times I’ve seen lions being cruel to you, and...” His voice got angry, and intense at the end, and then trailed off.

I laughed and cried at the same time.

“Forgive YOU? You died for ME! And besides, I have Fire to take care of me.

I felt Spark stiffen when I mentioned Fire.

“What’s wrong?” I asked him. He looked at me, opened his mouth as if he were about to say something, then closed it again.

“You know I’ve tried to protect you before.” He said, changing the subject. I didn’t know why he didn’t want to talk about our brother, but I didn’t object.

“How?”

“Remember when you were in the pride? Sometimes you would wake up tired, or, or just be tired in the middle of something, for no reason?”

I thought back to the times I had woken up with an unshakable exhaustion, I nodded.

“See, well that was me...well...sorta. Cause, it takes a lot of energy to bridge our worlds, and talk to you. My energy and yours. I’ve never been able to get through to you before, and all I’ve done is tire you and myself out. But, I did it because I was trying to warn you, about Proudmane, about your ‘friend’ Hover, I wanted so badly to tell you what was gonna happen...I needed Dad’s help to get through this time...we aren’t actually allowed to do this. The dead, really shouldn’t be talking to the living, but...rules are made to break...right?” Spark sounded so unsure of himself. What ever happened to that cub I

used to know that was sure of his every step? Of course, one could ask the same thing about me.

“Of course! And I’m so glad to see you both! I...I thought I’d lost you for ever...” I mumbled sadly. I guess I had, this was probably just a delirious dream I was having from loss of blood. But I didn’t care. The thought that Spark may have grown up where ever he was, and that my father was still around...it made my heart sing.

“Ah, you can’t get rid of us that easy. A little thing like death can’t stop me from standing up for my sister.” Laughed Spark.

My father came up beside us and nudged Spark on the side.

“We have to go. Before anyone notices. And Hobblestep needs to wake up.”

He said calmly, in his smooth, deep voice. His voice made me feel safe, and taken care of. Spark frowned, but didn’t object.

“Bye sis...I’ll come see you again. The next time I can...” He called as my father led him away.

“Good Bye Spark!” I called back. He turned around and said something, but before I could make it out, the white world faded away. And I woke up.

Chapter Sixteen

My body had been so light and free in the world of white where I had just been, where I had spoken to my long dead father and brother. But now that I was back in the real world, gravity hit me like a beetle under a rock. I was lying down all ready, but gravity made sure I stayed that way. I groaned. My head hurt. No, scratch that, my EVERYTHING hurt. I felt like I had when I’d been a cub all over again. My head felt so heavy. And the world seemed like it was spinning. I let out a feeble cough, and a mouthful of water escaped my mouth. Yesterday I would have given anything for just a tiny sip of water, and today it had almost killed me, I thought, amused by the world’s way of torturing me.

I finally got enough will power to open my eyes. One slit at a time. It was sunrise. Was I asleep from mid day yesterday to sun rise? I opened my eyes fully in the pink light. What happened to Feather? Who’s voice was it that I heard, the one who must have saved me from the crocodiles. Maybe it was Hover! I thought hopefully. Then, logic crushed my hope. Why would she leave? The pride she was in was probably perfectly fine. And even if she did leave, she wouldn’t have come after me. She didn’t even care when I left. It

could be Silentsneak I thought. She DID leave the pride, just before me. But, She had gone west, while I had headed south. So, there wasn't much chance of meeting up. Oh well. The answer to that could wait. I wanted, no, NEEDED to find Feather.

I lifted my head slowly. The world seemed to spin at a thousand miles an hour as I did so, but I didn't care. I tried to shake the dizzy feeling out of my head. My vision went fuzzy for a minute then focused on the bone-dry grass that surrounded me. The spinning had slowed down, and I could handle it now. I glanced around. And promptly found Feather. That was easy.

The little cub was asleep. He was curled up in a tight ball, and was pressed against my belly. My forepaw was draped over him. He must have wiggled his way underneath it, to make him feel better. I usually kept my paw over him, to help keep him warm in the terribly cold African nights. I looked closely at his peaceful sleeping face. The fur around his eyes was wet, glistening in the early morning light. It looked like he'd been crying recently.

"He's a good cub." Said a voice behind me coolly, "he tried to fight off the crocs for you. He failed. Of course, and I had to step in. But, he's really loyal. He hasn't left your side. You're lucky to have a son like him."

My fur stood on end.

"He's not my son." I replied, not turning around, but curling protectively around Feather.

I heard who ever it was step lightly over the shark grasses, and low growing shrubs to make her way over to me. I heard the way the paws hit the ground. Only a slight crackling from the plants. The wide paw of a lion would have stirred up more noise, no matter how lightly we stepped. Those were not paws of a lion. When the creature came into view, I wasn't surprised to see that it was the cheetah who had told me where to find the water hole, which had almost killed both Feather and I. My muscles tensed. She had been very hostile last time we had met her, I wouldn't let my guard down while Feather was such an easy target.

"If he's not your son, then how come you charged into a croc infested water hole to save him? I saw it in your eyes."

"Saw what in my eyes?"

"The drive. The instinct. When your cub is in danger, every hair on your pelt tells you to do anything you can to save them. I remember it. When Strike was killed, all I wanted to do was tear that lion to bits. But I knew it was a battle I couldn't win, and I held myself back. I regret that decision every day I lay my paws on this earth. I didn't have the

bravery that you showed today, lion, and for that, you have earned my respect.” The female cheetah dipped her head down respectfully to me.

I eyed her suspiciously. What she said seemed heart felt. Her brown eyes looked full of pain, in the memory of her lost cub. But for all I knew it was a show. She could be just pretending, so that when I let my guard down she could have her revenge on all lions, by killing Feather. The only thing I was certain of, was that this was the voice I heard when I was under water. This cheetah had saved my life, and Feather’s.

“Were you following us?” I asked coldly.

“I had a feeling you’d be stupid enough to go to the water hole. I wanted to make sure the young one didn’t get hurt. I was right to follow you. You both would have been killed if it weren’t for me.”

I didn’t say anything, but continued to look at her suspiciously. Dramatic changes in attitude could not be trusted.

“If you don’t want to believe me, fine. Don’t. But, this is where my cubs and I live. You are free to stay here until you recover.”

I heard a tiny yawn, looking down I saw that Feather was awake. He opened his eyes in tiny slits, then blinked and opened them again wider.

“H-hobblestep?” He whispered, his blue-green gaze huge. His whole body was trembling.

I smiled down at him and licked his forehead.

“Yes?” I answered, trying to sound soothing to the shivering little cub.

“Y-you woke up?”

“Of course.”

He looked at me for another moment, before leaping at me, and nuzzling my neck. Tears flowed down his cheeks, and onto the parched ground, which absorbed it immediately.

“Hobblestep! I was so scared that you weren’t going to wake up!! You were sleeping for days! DAYS! I thought that maybe you were dead! I don’t want you to die! Don’t die! If you were gone I don’t know WHAT I’d do!” he wailed, his muzzles pressing into my upper chest, “I’m sorry I went out there! I was just so thirsty...and...I’ll never do it again! I promise!” the little cub sniffled. I put my paw around him, and lowered my face to his level.

“I’m not going anywhere. As long as you need me, I’ll be there.” I whispered to him. His red-gold face was all wet, and his eyes looked more young, and innocent then I’d ever seen them.

“Promise?”

“I promise.” What a promise. I was trouble with legs. How was I supposed to keep a promise like THAT!?

Chapter Seventeen

My heart beat quickly. My legs pumping at their fastest speed. I stole a glance behind me. They were there. Still after me. I tried to pick up my pace, forcing my steps to get longer, faster, but without falling. Another glance told me they were gaining on me. I clenched my teeth and forced every last ounce of concentration and strength out of me. It wasn’t enough.

One of them careened onto my back, making me stop, to try to keep my balance, another took its chance, and coming beside me, it unbalanced me, knocking me to the ground.

They had me pinned. I lay still.

“Do you surrender?”

I rolled my eyes and sighed.

“Ok, ok, I surrender.”

“I surrender SIR to you!”

I laughed.

“All right. I surrender SIR! Will you all get off me now?”

“Hear that guys? Victory!” squeaked Feather triumphantly, jumping off me. His friends followed him.

I sat up and shook the dirt out of my pelt.

“That was our best one yet!!” Squealed Feather’s young cheetah friend Dapple. Dapple was the daughter of the cheetah who had saved Feather and I a few sunrises ago. The cheetah who saved us was named Shimmer. Dapple’s little brother Chase smiled shyly.

“Did we hurt you?” He asked meekly, his eyes full of fear. The little cheetah had been brutally attacked by a No-Mane because he had gotten in the way of it and Shimmer’s kill. He had been terrified of lions ever since, and still cowered away from me when ever I walked by, he seemed to be getting used to Feather though.

“No, you didn’t hurt me. I’m fine. That was fun.” I smiled down at him. He looked back at me doubtfully, then went to join Feather and Dapple, who had been complimenting each other on how well they coordinated in catching me.

It had been just under three weeks since Shimmer had saved Feather and I. Since then I found out that Shimmer had a broken canine tooth. It made it extremely hard to kill prey after she pinned it down. And since cheetahs aren’t built as strong as lions, she never had time to keep it down long enough to deliver a proper death bite. She could stalk like a shadow, run extraordinarily fast, and leap great distances to bring down her prey, but just not kill it, so most of her hunting expeditions were unsuccessful. I became the solution to this problem because, though I couldn’t hunt, I was still a lion, and could effectively kill any prey that Shimmer could bring down. I could also help hold the struggling animal down, because of my mass. The formally crocodile infested water hole’s water level had dropped so low that all the crocodiles who had lived there had either left or died. Now, every kind of prey you could desire crowded around the tiny water supply. The water would be gone soon, true, but while it was here, we had more than enough prey and water to live comfortably.

Since we had found the stable source of food and water, Feather had grown faster than I’d thought it was possible. He was only a little bigger, but he had the beginnings of a mane. Dark reddish brown fur was springing out around his neck and shoulders and between his ears. Sometimes I heard him practicing roaring when he thought no one was around. He was so similar to his brother. He was kind and gentle. And he was about the age that I had first met Golden. I remembered the first time I’d met Feather’s older brother so well. I’d thought he was the most handsome lion I’d ever met from the moment I first lay eyes on him. Golden’s mane had been so tiny then. Barley more than a few tufts of hair, like Feather’s. Nothing like the magnificent flowing thing it was when I’d last seen him.

I started to think about Golden. Had his mane gotten bigger? Had he been in any battles yet? Had the claws of another lion put scars on his perfect face? I wondered if I’d even recognize him if I saw him. I missed Golden. So much. I missed him even more when Feather did things like Golden used to do. Sometimes Feather would smile, and it would bring me right back to the last time I’d seen Golden smile, as if it were yesterday.

I was lonely. I had Shimmer, but she was a cheetah. By nature, her species were loners. Keeping company wasn’t something she was meant to do. She barley ever spoke. Sometimes she would just get up and leave, be gone for a few days, then show up again,

with out a word. Feather had his two new friends, who seemed to defy their nature, and spend every waking moment with him. Which left me alone to think a lot. And when I was alone to think, I mostly thought about my pride. About how life used to be. True, it wasn't always great, but being alone now, with no pride, no family, it seemed amazing that I was once been accepted into a pride. It just blew my mind that I had once had friends. The worst part was, I couldn't remember, no matter how hard I tried, the feeling of just being with a friend. The feeling I'd had when I was with Hover, or Silentsneak, or Golden, when I was just content to be with them.

I sighed as I followed the cubs to their sleeping places. Things weren't half as organized here as they'd been in the pride. You just sleep wherever you like. No designated sleeping areas, no inner territory, just lawlessness.

Shimmer stalked out of the long grasses, seemingly out of nowhere, and fell into step beside me.

"Are you ready to go hunting?" She asked, her high voice, was impatient, as cheetahs often are.

"Sure" I replied, then called to the cubs, "Feather, Dapple, Chase, we're going hunting. Be back soon!"

Shimmer and I set off. Usually our hunting trips were filled with awkward silence, but today, Shimmer chose to speak.

"You're very lucky you survived the crocodile attack."
That happened weeks ago. Why was she suddenly talking about it now?

"Uh, well it's thanks to you."

"No, it's not."

"Are you saying you're not the one who saved me?"

"I pulled you from the water, and scared the crocodiles off, but I didn't save you."

"What are you saying?"

"Hobblestep, an average lion would have died in the water from that. They would have drowned, or died of blood loss, or trauma, but you didn't. I was certain your wounds would get infected, or you would just die after a few days, but you didn't. You awoke, and now, less than a moon cycle later, here you are, fit to hunt. Do you realize the odds?"

“I’m just lucky I-”

“No, you’re more than that. My mate was attacked by just one croc, he was killed instantly. There must have been at least seven attacking you, and you survived, virtually unharmed.”

“Well I’m a lion and-”

“That doesn’t matter. You’re a cripple and you survived seven crocodiles attacking you, and you weren’t even seriously injured. The Gods are looking out for you.”

Was she serious? GODS?? Lions don’t even believe in Gods. The savanna isn’t a God. It’s just a fellow predator. I didn’t want to offend Shimmer by saying Gods didn’t exist, so I stayed silent as we looked for prey. When we arrived at the water hole, it was deserted. Padding up to where the water line had been yesterday, I was appalled to see that it was dry. The water hole had dried up. I gulped.

“What are we going to do?”

“Find prey elsewhere.”

“But...the water...”

“The water is gone. No point dwelling on it. Lets go. We can hunt first, think later.”

I followed Shimmer and we searched the territory for prey. There were just hoof prints. The herds must have found that there was no water early in the morning and left. All the herds were gone.

Suddenly I spotted a springbok, probably too slow to keep up with it’s herd, staggering around in disorientation.

“How about that one?” I whispered to Shimmer. She narrowed her eyes at it.

“It’s not on our territory...but...the cubs must be fed. Lets do it.” She replied in a hushed tone, then silently stalked off to find a good place to charge at it from. I also attempted to move closer to it, almost as stealthy as the lithe cheetah I moved in. I kept my eyes on Shimmer’s barley visible shape, moving through the grasses. I was waiting for her signal. When she flashed the white on the back of her ears, it meant she was about to leap on the creature, and warned me to be ready to pin it, and end its life.

I saw the signal, and not moments later, Shimmer leapt out of the grass, and chased after the startled animal at her full speed. She easily caught up to it, I followed, the creature ran

in terror, making sharp turns, it knew cheetah's couldn't turn very well. Shimmer began to lag behind, and I lost sight of her. So did the springbok, because its pace grew a little slower. As soon as it did, I saw Shimmer's shape give a massive leap out of the grass, and straight onto the springbok's back. She unbalanced it, and I ran in, and pinned it. It was kicking out its legs, in a futile attempt at breaking our grip. It shook its head from side to side, and its tongue lolled out over its blunt teeth. I did feel sorry for it. I really didn't like killing, but it was what we ate. I sank my teeth into its neck, I felt warm flesh under my deadly grip. I made sure to be biting exactly on the windpipe of the creature, it would cut off its air supply, killing it quickly, and relatively painlessly. Its movements slowed, and stopped. I unhooked my jaws from its neck and licked the blood off my lips.

I heard snarling and barking behind me. Shimmer and I both turned to see five African wild dogs snarling and stepping out of hiding.

"You stole our prey! Dirty cats!" One barked, his voice was deep and rough, his teeth were bared, "You'll pay! Dogs! Attack!"

Before I knew it, there were five dogs after us. Shimmer and I both ran. Unfortunately in different directions. Three dogs gave chase to me, and two to her. I ran as fast as I could, and was scared to death that I would trip. After a while I heard the foot steps stop, I turned around to see the three dogs stopped in a line.

"You may not respect borders, but we do. Know that the second you step over this one, we'll be here. Our pack does NOT take kindly to prey stealers." Growled the lead dog, narrowing its brown eyes at me.

'Oh great...' I thought, but I couldn't leave. I was stuck on this side of the line, the dog's entire territory between me and Shimmer's territory. I decided to spend the night where I was, maybe the dogs would be gone in the morning. I felt horrible. Any fully able lion could fight off five of those dogs, easy, but not me. I dug my claws into the earth in frustration. The two that followed Shimmer may have caught up to her. If they did, it was my fault.

As I walked further and further away from the border, I wondered what creature inhabited it. My question was promptly answered, because a huge Mane burst out of the bushes and pinned me down. He glared down at me threateningly. That face...that scent...I knew those hostile hazel eyes. Who was it..? Looking over at the paw that pinned me down, I suddenly knew.

"Sixtoes! Sixtoes it's me! Hobblestep!"

Chapter Eighteen

“Who?” Sixtoes hissed.

“Hobblestep. Hobbs, Fire’s sister...I met you once, with his bachelor group. R-remember?”

His claws sheathed. And his eyes narrowed in thought. What if he didn’t remember me?

“Hobbs...is that really you?”

“The one and only.”

He stepped off me, and waited for me to get up.

“Geeze, it really is you! What happened to your pride? Man, you look like Dry Season!”

“Proud happened to my pride. Remember? Guy with the nasty temper? He killed my mother, and our last mane, then told me to get out.”

“Wow. That’s terrible! Man, I’m really sorry Hobbs!”

“Oh, it’s ok. It’s not your fault...” I mumbled.

“Right...hey, well good news, I’m Sixmane now! Happy for me?”

“Oh that’s great Sixto- uh, mane! It’s so weird to think you lead a pride now!”

“Yea, I’m still getting used to the idea myself. Say, do you, uh, wanna have a look around? I mean, it’s the least I can do for jumping on you like that...sorry...”

I smiled.

“I think I’d like that.”

“Great! I mean, good. Follow me.” He said with a big grin, ruffling his dark mane excitedly. I followed him as he proudly told me all about his territory. He knew every rock, every ant hill, every blade of grass like the back of his paw. His territory was huge! And, they had a very deep water hole that had barley been affected by the harshness of dry season. He told me the reason he automatically jumped on me when he scented lion was there had been so many No-Manes snooping around his amazing piece of territory he had to show them how strong he was, and that he wouldn’t give up his territory without a quite a fight.

I listened with a smile the whole time. I loved the sound of his voice. The way he articulated his words, the way every word flowed so smoothly, he always knew the perfect thing to say, at the perfect time. When I was finished my tour, we headed back to his inner territory. He said that while he had been patrolling the borders, his lionesses had been on a hunting trip for wildebeest and asked if I wanted to join them for a meal. I had whole-heartedly said yes.

A wildebeest was the most delicious kind of prey. But the full grown ones were huge, and dangerous. It took a pride of very well coordinated lionesses to pull off a hunt for one. The pride elder (the eldest lioness), was in charge of organizing a hunt. My mother had never been a very good elder, and almost never caught big game like wildebeest. Though I did remember Powerstrike being hailed as one of the best hunters any one had ever seen, and most hunts with her at their head had been successful. She would probably have lived to perfect her daughter's skills, had she not died by those mysterious circumstances so long ago. I sighed. I had just turned my joy of having wildebeest for the first time in a long time, to bitter guilt and regret. What was wrong with me? I shook the thoughts out of my head as we arrived in on the inner territory.

There was a lone lioness sitting there. She had dark orange eyes, that almost appeared red in the light.

"We were wondering when you were going to get back Sixmane we-"

She stopped when I stepped out behind Sixmane.

"Who is THAT?" She hissed.

"And old friend. Sorry, what were you saying?"

"Um, we took down a wildebeest, Silentstrike and the others are waiting for you before they start."

"Thank you. Hobblestep here will be joining us for dinner." Said Sixmane calmly, totally at ease with the unhappy lioness who was staring him down.

"WHAT?? It's DRY SEASON!! Are you insane??"

"Waterhunter, please, our water hole is full, all the prey is on our territory, you know as well as I do that we have plenty to spare."

Waterhunter glared at him, but didn't object, instead she turned and led the way to where the other lionesses in Sixmane's pride waited. When we arrived, there were three other

lionesses sitting patiently around a dead wildebeest. The oldest, who I had heard Waterhunter and Sixmane refer to as Silentstrike. She looked wise, but very old and near her time of death. She raised an eye brow.

“Who have you brought Sixmane?”

“My old friend Hobblestep.”

“Hmm...I see...” Murmured the old lioness, “Well, the prey is all yours. We will eat once you finish your share.”

“Thanks Silentstrike.” Sixmane dipped his head to the lead lioness and then went and hungrily tore a chunk out of prey off. When he finished, he flicked his tail, and the rest of us crowded around the dead animal. Sixmane sat beside me as I ate the meat.

“So how have you been surviving? I mean, it’s dry season, and you don’t look like you can hunt so great, no offense or anything, I’m just curious.”

“Well, at first I just scavenged, then I met this cheetah named Shimmer, and we hunt together.”

“You hunt with a CHEETAH!? Ha, doesn’t it smell? Aren’t cheetahs supposed to smell like long-dead-kill?”

“No! What’s your deal with cheetahs?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you. But, we were taught to hate cheetahs as cubs. I’m surprised that your mother didn’t teach you that they are more sly than snakes, and can’t be trusted. I wouldn’t hang around that ‘Shimmer’ for too long if I were you.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. He believed what he was saying. How could he? Not all cheetahs are traitors! Just like not all lions are the type that would give Chase his injury! Placing creatures in those categories got under my fur. I stood up, and before I knew it, my legs were taking me away from the site of the kill. I felt such intense anger. My loyalty to Shimmer ran deeper than I thought. Sixmane ran after me.

“Hobbs! Wait up!”

I slowed down, his voice was pulling me closer to him.

“Hobbs, where are you going?”

“I don’t know...”

“Hey, look...I was thinking...why go anywhere? Stay here. With me.”

My body felt about as steady a newborn gazelle. I had stopped, giving him time to catch up to me, and trap my eyes in his warm hazel gaze. The butterflies that had filled me when I had first been caught in his eyes like this came back. I shiver ran down my spine as he pressed his muzzle to my cheek affectionately.

“Please Hobbs? It would be great...”

I was speechless.

“Um...uh...I think...I...yes...?”

My words came out all distorted, I couldn't think straight enough to speak properly...

“Really? You would? Hey great!” He nuzzled me. Was I really going to get into a pride?

“But...but will the other lionesses accept me? I mean, Waterhunter didn't seem to like me...”

“Well...all you have to do is have my cubs, and you'll have a purpose, mothers don't hunt anyway. That way you wouldn't be a drain on the pride.” He said matter-of-factly in a light, happy tone.

I pulled away.

“Cubs?” I echoed.

“Um...”

Thoughts swirled around in my head. Cubs? Me? A mother? I wasn't mom material! I'd practically raised Feather, sure, but he wasn't just BORN when I got him! And I didn't raise him very well, considering that I had taught him absolutely nothing! I felt like I was going to faint. Sixmane caught me in his gaze again.

“I'm sure you'd make a great mom...” He whispered. All the bad thoughts about cubs melted in my head when I looked into his eyes, but in their place darker thoughts arose. A drain. I was a drain. If I agreed to join this pride I would be nothing but a drain. Cubs would be a quick fix, but once they were grown, I'd be me again. The stupid, useless drain. I couldn't do that to Sixmane's pride. I wanted to stay, I really did, but the strongest instinct inside me told me to go. To get out of there. Not to stay long enough to get any more attached to this lion. If I really did like him as much as I thought I did, I couldn't

stay and weaken his other wise, very strong pride. I clenched my teeth, and tore my gaze away from his. And backed away.

"I have to go Sixmane..." I whispered.

"What? No!"

"I...I have to..." I whispered, fighting the tears that were welling up in my eyes.

"Hobbs, if you don't want cubs, that's fine! We can get by without you hunting! Please stay! Stay with me!" His eyes were pleading.

"N-no..." It took all my will power to say that. My stomach twisted in agony as I said no to his hypnotist gaze, tears were running down my face now, I pulled farther from him.

"But Hobblestep I love you!" He said, his voice barley more than a whisper, but it had the intensity of a thousand roars.

My whole body shook, but I could not **WOULD NOT** weaken Sixmane's pride. I had to keep that mind set. Before I gave myself a chance to change my mind, I ran. I ran as fast as I could. Not caring where I was going.

"No! Come back! What did I do wrong??" I heard him call, his voice faint from a distance. I closed my eyes and just kept running. Sixmane's scent was everywhere. He had just been scent marking when we were on the tour, and it made me feel like he was everywhere. I had to get out...had to get out. After an hour of running, the air cleared of his scent. I stopped in a bare patch of land and wept silently.

"What's upsetting you dear?" I heard a rough voice snarl. My head whipped around to see a wild dog staring at me. I could fight one off.

"Get away." I roared, unsheathing my claws.

"Wouldn't do that if I were you." It said calmly, and more, and more dogs crept out of the shadows, I was surrounded, by at least ten of them. One stepped forward. It was the one who had spoken before when they chased me over the border into Sixmane's territory.

"I told you we'd be watching."

Chapter Nineteen

I looked around again at the ten dogs that surrounded me. All of them had their tiny yellow teeth showing, their big mouse-like ears pointed away from me. The one who had spoken before spoke again.

“If you resist, you will be punished, are you going to resist?” He asked, his dark golden eyes narrowed at me in dark amusement. I hissed at him.

“Oh, right, and if I don’t resist you WON’T attack.” I snarled at the smug dog.

“That’s right.” He said calmly, his smile growing wider when I found myself with no retort.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Exactly what you think I mean, come with us back to the Pack Tree and you won’t be harmed...not yet anyway. Coming or not?”

I bared my teeth at the dogs, all of them broke out in a chorus of high pitched whines and growls, but were quickly silenced by the one who had spoken before.

“Remember subjects, Redband Blackrage left specific instructions to not harm it further.” He growled at them, then turning to me he said, “but we ARE authorized to use any means necessary to get you to the Pack Tree. So come willingly or be forced. It’s your choice lion.”

The dog looked so smug. So superior, I wanted to scratch that smile right off his ugly face. But with so many of his kind surrounding me, that was out of the question. I felt stupid and defeated, but in the end I mumbled,

“Lead on..,” and let the dogs surround me, and herd me to their ‘pack tree’.

I wished I’d stayed with Sixmane. At least there I would have been taken care of. I would have had a pride, and a mate...and now here I was surrounded by blood thirsty wild dogs. What had possessed me to leave? I must have something wrong with me. I mean, what lioness in their right mind runs away from a healthy Mane asking them to be their mate? Maybe I was afraid of cubs...of a mate...? That must have been it. And I’d blown my only chance at having a good life. One of the dogs nipped my leg.

“The Redband approaches! Bow at his presence lion!” It snarled at me.

“What?” I asked, but then I saw a big wild dog approaching. It had a distinctive red band of fur that stretched around the base of its neck. It was mostly black, unlike most of the other dogs, who were mixtures of tan, white, black, brown and different shades of red.

“BOW YOU FOOL!” The dog snarled again, this time jumping onto my back, making my front legs slide in front of me, until my muzzle rested on the dusty soil. I tried to lift my head, but several dogs now held me down in a bowing position. I hissed in frustration. And tried to wedge my way out, whacking dogs off from all sides. Once I got all the dogs that had been holding me down off, I panted, and faced the ‘Redband’ as the other dog had referred to him. I knocked him over and easily pinned the creature down. I dwarfed him, even though I was small for a lion, I was huge compared to these dogs.

“Tell your men to stand down, and let me go, or I’ll rip your throat out!” I roared. I needed to get out of here. To get back to Feather, and Shimmer. I wasn’t going to be part of their little game. The dog under my paw just smiled. Were they all the same in their smugness? I glared down at him. Why would he be smiling! I’d won! ‘

“Step off Redband Blackrage or be killed here and now.”

What now? I looked around to see more dogs than I thought could exist! I had thought that 11 was the population of the pack. Boy was I wrong. Over 40 dogs now surrounded me. All of their eyes trained on me. Their muscles tensed, ready to jump on me, and tear me to bits.

Redband Blackrage squirmed out from my grip.

“Now that you know you cannot escape, no matter what you do, listen to me. I have a proposition. You help me and you live.”

Chapter Twenty

I wanted to be defiant. To show I wasn’t some weak cripple who would do what ever these dogs commanded, but I couldn’t. I dug my claws into the ground, then out again in my frustration. Redband Blackrage just let a dark smile creep across his pure black muzzle.

“I assume that’s a yes?”

I didn’t reply. I stared at him coldly. If looks could kill, he would be dead a thousand times over.

“Right, my subjects have been watching you. Since the female cheetah shares a border with us, we watch her activities closely. A few Seven-Suns ago you appeared. We were perplexed by what the cheetah could possibly be getting out of your presence. Until we saw you hunting. We did note that the cheetah had a broken canine tooth, and estimated

that she would soon starve, and that we would be free to move in on her territory. But, she ingeniously found you. You killed her prey for her. Though you may be totally useless at hunting, you are useful at killing prey.”

The dog paused, choosing his next words. What was he getting at? He must really enjoy the sound of his own voice to go on this long, and I could tell more was coming.

He started again, “We are the most successful hunters on the savanna. This is not just because of what we think, but observing your petty hunting methods, we have calculated that we, are the best of all predators here and now. But, we are small. When we take down big game, we are incapable of delivering a death bite, and killing it. So we are forced to eat the poor fools alive. Many brave soldiers of this pack have been injured simply because the dumb creatures keep kicking once we begin eating. My proposition is this, you follow us on hunts, and do for us what you did for the cheetah, and you live. If you attempt to leave, you will die. If you refuse to help you will die. If you do any thing that was not authorized by me, then you will die. What do you say?”

“I can’t! I have to take care of a cub! Please, understand! He needs me!” I cried. They were suggesting I could never leave! That was insane! I had to get back to Feather! “I won’t! No! No! I won’t! You can’t just KEEP me here!”

“I can do whatever I want. I’m Redband. If you’re thinking about the cub, what good will you do him dead? May I remind you that we are fully capable and willing of dispatching you now. The penalty for stealing prey is death, you are the one who killed the prey, and you are the one who should be punished, I am offering you a way out. All you have to do is take it.” Growled Redband Blackrage, his voice tough and serious. It fit the harsh environment that surrounded us.

I took another glance at the vicious looking canines that surrounded me. Redband Blackrage was right. I would be no good to Feather dead. If I agreed to their demands now, I could bide my time until I could find a way out. It couldn’t be that hard. They were only dogs after all.

“I...I...” I tried to agree, but the words caught in my throat. It felt like giving up. ‘You don’t have a choice’ I reminded myself, “I agree.” I whispered.

A massive smile spread across Redband Blackrage’s face.

“Brilliant!” He barked giddily, “Here that men? We have ourselves a lion-servant!”

The other dogs howled and barked in agreement, wagging their big bushy tails and letting their long pink tongues hang out of their elongated mouths.

“Blackband Shadowsun!” Called Redband Blackrage. A smaller male dog stepped out of the crowd of wild dogs. He had dark brown paws, ears and muzzle, with black bands of fur around his ankles, and the base of his tail. The rest of his body was covered in blotches of blonde, white and pale tanned fur.

“Yes sir?” He addressed his leader respectfully dipping his head ever so slightly downward, and drooping his tail, a clear show that he was the lower ranking dog.

“Find a place for our, ‘guest’ to sleep, and be kept until it is needed. Make sure it is no where need to border, post guards on all sides of our borders at ALL times, I don’t want this prize escaping from my grasp.”

“Sir, yes sir, anything else sir?”

“Hmm...gather the Whitebands for me will you? I’d like to choose my mate for this season soon so that the pups are born at the beginning of wet season.”

“Yes sir.” Replied Blackband Shadowsun, not making eye contact with his leader. He turned to me. “Come lion.” He set off, and I followed, several dogs following behind me. Blackband Shadowsun didn’t seem too hostile. Not like the cold, smug eyes I felt following me from all sides. He just seemed simply apathetic.

“So...when Redband Blackrage dies, will you be leader? You’re second in command right?” I asked him, trying to get my mind off the dark looks I was getting.

“I am second in command, but I will never take the place of Redband. I was born a Blackband. I need no more, and I was meant to have no more. All is how the spirits will it to be.” He replied curtly. His words were strange. What was with the long names anyway? Blackband? Redband? Whiteband? It confused me. Blackband Shadowsun seemed very uninterested in talking to me, so I was silent for the rest of our walk.

“Here. This is dead center of our territory. You will stay here, under constant supervision.”

“What am I supposed to..well..DO all day?”

“Your amusement is not of my concern. Have a pleasant day.” With that, he turned and walked over to a cluster of wild dogs, picking out three or four, then going on to the next group and choosing more. I wondered what he was doing. But I could barley make out the mingled shapes of the dogs. So many of them. I sighed. I rested my muzzled on my front paws and looked up at the beady eyes that stared at me from the dogs guarding me. I decided my eyes were better off shut, and drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Twenty One

I struggled to keep pace. With dogs nipping at my ankles from behind me, and two running beside me to make sure I didn't escape, I followed the pack as they hunted. We slowed, and came to a stop behind some bushes. I heard vicious snarling and then triumphant barks and whines, that was my cue. I was escorted out of the bushes so I could do my job. I walked out toward the dogs, struggling to pin down a struggling wildebeest. I bent over the animal, breathed an apology and bit down on its neck. Making sure it was in no more pain.

The way these dogs hunted sickened me. They would use sheer numbers to bring down any prey they wanted. They would knock it over, and show no respect toward their prey. They would brutally rip chunks of flesh off of it, and begin eating before the poor soul was dead yet. Even with me there, it didn't stop them from ripping up the creature's hide before I could get there. It sent shivers down my spine that they could be so unfeeling.

"Ah, it was a good hunt today men!" Barked Redband Blackrage triumphantly. The hunters barked and howled in agreement, "No one has been hurt by prey since we acquired our lion! May I offer first bite to her?" He said, his tone growing more serious. First bite? That was an honor among these dogs. Maybe I wasn't just a slave to them. Redband Blackrage took a step back from their kill, and his men moved as well. I bent my head and took a cautious bite of the juicy prey. The taste exploded on my tongue. It was the first piece of fatty prey I'd had in ages! I took another few bites, self conscious that the dogs were waiting for me to finish before they began. I hurried myself up and stepped backwards, to show I was done. The dogs clustered around the dead animal, growling and whining at each other as they dug their teeth into its skin. I walked over to Redband Blackrage.

"Thank you for the honor of first bite sir."

"Not a problem. You have been invaluable. You deserve it." He said, his muzzle covered in blood. He had one of those faces that only had two expressions, either it was frightening and menacing, or it was puppy like and harmless. Right now, even though blood dripped down his face, he looked about as evil as a baby elephant. I smiled and headed back to the Pack Tree.

He didn't even order guards to follow me. I knew I couldn't leave. I'd been here, in the pack for a little over two seven-suns. I'd tried to escape almost every day in my first few days there. I had always found guards waiting, the same pitying expression every time. I guess Redband Blackrage's threat saying I would die if I tried to leave was a bluff. But

now that I was here, I really couldn't leave. I'd searched and searched, but hadn't found even one loophole in their guarding strategies.

I arrived at the Pack Tree. It was a gargantuan baobab tree. Much larger than the one in my old territory. It was the width of many dogs lined up tail to nose. Its massive branches stretched to the sky and into the realm of clouds and sun. Its trunk was hollowed out, and served as a den for all the females with pups. I'd only been inside a few times. I wasn't usually allowed near pups, but some of the guards were nicer than others. One in particular named Dusksun was almost a friend. She would talk to me sometimes, and gave me proper tours of their territory. She and her mate Blackgrass had been guarding me one day when I'd convinced them to let me take a look in the den. Dusksun had convinced Blackgrass to let me go.

It was amazing in there. It had the sweet smell of pups about it. It was always a few degrees warmer inside when it was cold, and a few degrees cooler when it was too warm out. You could sit and just watch the pups play joyfully with each other. Since the pack was so large – the population as Dusksun had told me was at about 65 at the moment – there were a lot of pups. They all had huge paws that they hadn't grown into yet, their faces were soft and innocent, unlike the hard scarred faces that all the adults had. Cubs in lion prides could never play so care freely. There was always the creeping fear that a No-Mane would come, and destroy their world. That was the only thing I admired about the dogs. The way they created such a sheltered environment for their pups, so that they could just be pups, with out a care in the world.

I took a breath of the sweet afternoon air. I heard snarling and whimpering from behind me. I turned and ran toward the sound. I found four male dogs snarling and laughing at a small female who they were attacking.

"Hey! Get off her you brutes!" I roared at them. All four's ears shot up straight in the air, and they turned to look at me. The sound of a lions roar still scared them, even though it was just mine.

"Shove off Hobblestep!" Barked one.

"Yea! We can do what ever we want! There ain't a thing you can do about it cripple!" Sneered another.

"Get AWAY from her Shadowpaws." I snarled at the one who had spoken first. I knew him. He hated Blackband Shadowsun for some reason I could never place, and the pack often gossiped about him in hushed whispers. The only thing I knew was that this dog was no popular with his pack. I unsheathed my claws.

“You wouldn’t dare hurt us! Redband Blackrage would have your pelt!” He growled, but I could see the fear in his eyes.

“Try me.” I growled in a low tone. Trying to sound threatening. I’d found that most of the dogs here were uncomfortable with me, they feared me because I was a lion, and didn’t really take into account that I was at their mercy. The fear in his dark orange eyes grew more apparent, and he bolted, his three friends followed.

I walked over to the one he’d been attacking. She lay on the ground motionless. She was bleeding, but very lightly. Around her neck though, there was no fur. From the way the bare skin throbbed red, I’d guess the dogs who had attacked her were tearing the fur off her neck, but barley breaking the skin with their teeth. What was going on?

I nudged her gently with my nose. Her eyes slid open slowly. They were a deep colour of blue.

“Hello? Are you all right?”

“Wh...what happened...?” she looked disoriented and afraid.

“Shadowpaws and some others attacked you. It looks like they took the fur off your neck...”

“Oh. I should have known that...” She looked tiered and defeated. Why should she have know it? Had this sort of thing happened before?

“Why should you have known?”

“Long story...it would bore you...”

“Nothing bores me.”

“Uh...look, can we go somewhere else to talk about this? Shadowpaws might come back with more dogs...”

“Ok. Where do you want to go?”

She looked at me for a moment. Deciding weather or not to trust me? Her sapphire eyes probed me. Then she turned and ran. I guess I failed her little test. She stopped.

“Coming?” She called.

Guess not.

Chapter Twenty-two

I followed the dog over to the Pack Tree. Were we going to the pup area? She turned sharply and veered away from the entrance. I followed curiously. She made another turn, heading straight into a sharp looking bush. I paused.

“Come on.” I heard her voice call. I squeezed under the bush uncomfortably. But when I came out I was surprised to find a wide open space. It looked just like the pup area, but there was no one inside. I could hear the dull hum of pups giggling and playing on the other side of a wall of bark.

“We’re in the other side of the Pack Tree. No one knows about it. I found it when I was a pup...” She smiled fondly at the memory of her pup hood. I walked over, curiosity burning my pelt.

“Why did your pack mates attack you?”

She looked down.

“Do you know the system that we choose our leaders in?”

“Not really...”

“Well here it is: if you want to be leader, you have to be a male, and you have to have a band of red colouring on your neck, paws, tail or around your belly. No exceptions. To be second in command, you they are the same requirements, but with black bands. And to take a mate who is leader or second in command, you have to be a female, but with a white band.”

I nodded slowly. That’s why they had the strange long names.

“My father was once leader of this pack. His name used to be Redband Strongbreeze. He was a good, kind dog. Lead our pack well. But very recently, his fur began to fall off...we didn’t know why. The fur on his neck, where his band had been, was all gone after only a few days. The pack took it as a sign from the spirits that he wasn’t meant to be Redband anymore. They turned on him. He’d never done ANYTHING wrong. He was a great leader, and a great dog! The pack turned on him so viciously...” The small dog cringed at the memory.

Had the other dogs been attacking her because of who her father was? But why would they rip the fur from her neck because of that?

“I was born a whiteband. I have...er...had a white band around my neck. But once my father lost power and popularity, they decided I didn’t deserve to be a whiteband, and tore it off. The first time it happened I couldn’t get over how cruel it was, but after the second and third...it just became something I came to expect. Every time a tiny bit of fur grows back, they find me, and tear it off. I forgot about it this time...with you around, all the dogs are so pre occupied with you’re being here, I thought...maybe they’d forget...I guess they didn’t.”

Oh. The dog had gone from being high in the chain of command, to the very bottom. I could tell from the way she spoke that she needed to get that out. She had most likely had those words bottled up inside her with no one to talk to about it because no one in her pack would listen. I sat beside her, and told her of what had happened to me. How my mother had hated me for not being able to do all the things other lionesses could do. The way my pride had hated me, and how I hadn’t had a friend in the world. Until Hover. As I spoke of the way Hover had made me change my whole view of the world, I decided that I would be this dog’s Hover. I would stick by her. She needed a friend. I wanted to make this dog feel something other than the sorrow that clearly plagued her. As it had me.

For the first time since I’d arrived in the pack, getting away was far from my thoughts.

A few days later I basked in the sun light. I had become pretty good friends with the dog who I’d talked to in the tree. Her name was Dawnfire.

She trotted up to me. Looking proud of herself.

“Hey Hobblestep.” She said, a huge grin on her pale cream coloured muzzle.

“Hi. What are you so happy about?” I asked, sitting up and licking some dirt off my foreleg.

“I have a message from Feather.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

“What? How do you even know who that is?”

Dawnfire’s smile grew wider.

“He found me.”

“What?? Dawnfire tell me what happened!!”

“Ok, so I was on guard duty at the border, when I spotted a lion cub sniffing around. When he saw me, he attacked me! Yelling something about killing his friend. I got him off me, and told him that we didn’t kill any lion, and that he must have us confused with another pack. He told me that some one named ‘Shimmer’ told him that his friend was killed by wild dogs, because they crossed OUR border. That made me think about you. We did capture you, for stealing prey and crossing the border, who ever ‘Shimmer’ is may have thought you were dead. So I asked him what his friends name was, and he said Hobblestep...”

“Dawnfire are you serious!? Wh-what was his message??”

“Well, I have a message from him, and one from Shimmer who he went and got as soon as I told him you were here.”

“Ok! Please tell me!” I urged her.

“Feather said that he never gave up hope that you were alive, and Shimmer said that she will try to find a way to get you out.” Dawnfire recited the messages with a serious expression, as if she was trying to remember the word for word messages.

Joy flooded through me. Feather knew I was alive. He was alive! Shimmer was alive! I gave a leap of pure happiness.

“You really saw him! What did he look like? Has his mane grown in more? Is he big? How big is he?” Questions spilled out of my mouth like a landslide.

“But don’t you have a reply?” She asked.

A reply? I could TALK to them through Dawnfire?

“Dawnfire you are a great friend! Of course I have a reply! Please tell Feather that I’ll see him soon, and that I’m fine, and that I love him. And tell Shimmer not to do anything that would put herself in danger. Please.”

Dawnfire nodded vigorously, her smile spread all the way down her muzzle.

“I knew this would make you happy! I’ll go find them right away!”

It became a regular thing, delivering messages. I could stay in contact with Feather, on what was going on in his life, on how he was feeling. It almost felt like he was there with me.

One day Dawnfire and I were sitting and talking in her private part of the Pack Tree. We went in there to talk about things that would get Dawnfire kicked out of her pack if anyone heard. Like delivering messages out for me, and sometimes we even planned on ways to get me out. Today we were talking about nothing really.

“I wish Dry Season would just END all ready.” I sighed.

“We’ve got a few good moon cycles left of it. But I know what you mean. It feels like its been SEASONS since I had some water that wasn’t muddy.”

“Why can’t the sun just give it a rest and stop being so bloody hot?”

“Sunce won’t do that. She’s evil. It’s Oblak’s responsibility to FORCE him out.” Said the dog absently.

“Who are they?”

“You’ve never heard the story of Sunce and Oblak?”

“No...”

“Oh! Well...here’s how it goes.

According to ancient stories, it used to be wet season all the time. Life here was easy. The skies were ruled by the merciful god Oblak. He made life good, and made sure life was easy for all, and that there was never any need to fight for prey, or water, or land. He is the god of peace and clouds.

But he had a sister. Her name was Sunce. She was jealous that her brother had the thrown of the skies. She thought she was a better leader than him. But she knew not how to keep balance or peace.

One day she struck her brother, burning his once beautiful white pelt to a dark and cold grey. She attacked him until he was forced to give up his thrown to her. He was the god of peace, and didn’t want to hurt his sister. So he let her rule. For moon cycles. Until he saw what she had done to the paradise he had created. She just bombarded the savanna with her rays, not caring what kind of damage she did.

Every Wet Season, Oblak get the courage to stand up to Sunce. They have a massive battle. They shake the sky and the ground. Their growls can be heard in ever storm, the sound of Thunder. With ever strike from his vicious sister, Oblak's pelt became darker and darker. Until it appears almost black. Storm clouds.

Oblak's blood pours down from the heavens in the form of rain, and Sunce's in the form of lightning. Oblak is almost fatally wounded at the beginning of every Wet Season but his blood gives life to our world. His sister is strong, and she always takes control back, creating Dry Season again, but every year he challenges her. And every year he fails. But he does it anyway because he temporarily changes our world back to the way it was meant to be." She ended the legend wistfully. Suddenly a surprised look twisted her peaceful face.

"Did you hear that?" She whispered, staring at the entrance, "There it is again!"

I heard it this time. A crackling sound. It sounded like someone was crawling under the bush that blocked the entry, and kept the place a secret.

"Is there a back way out?" I asked urgently.

"No!" Whispered Dawnfire, her eyes huge. All we could do was wait and see who it was. If it was someone who would suspect us of anything, I promised myself that I would take the blame. Dawnfire didn't deserve to be persecuted further by her pack.

A black paw shot through the low entrance, and felt its way around on the sandy ground, then shot back out. A dark brown muzzle pushed under the low hole that let us get in and out of our hiding spot. The dog pushed its head through, then squeezed the rest of its body in. It was Shadowpaws. He narrowed his dark orange eyes at us.

"I thought I smelled traitors."

His dark pelt was only partially illuminated by the narrow beams of sun light that cascaded through the knot holes in the big hollow tree. He had a pale golden pelt mostly. With black streaks that looked like the patterns sunlight created on water. His lower leg right down to his ankles was white with black spots and all four of his paws were jet black at the bottom. He had a black stripe between his eyes that made their colour look even more defined, as they bore into us.

"I've seen Dawnfire delivering messages to the lion cub and the cheetah." His tone was hushed, his face was poorly illuminated and I couldn't make out his expression, but I caught a flash of bright white teeth as the light glinted off them. He was smiling.

"W-what are you going to do?" Whispered Danwfire.

The light shifted around on his teeth as his smile grew wider.

“I’m going to help you.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

“Help us?” Echoed Dawnfire, her voice hollow in disbelief.

“Yes.”

“Why would you do that? Why should we even TRUST you?” Is hissed at the dog.

“Because I hate Blackband Shadowsun. All I’ve ever wanted was to be Blackband, but I was born with black paws, rather than paws with black BANDS on them. My brother got them instead. He never even WANTED it. Well, if I can do anything to make his job harder, I will.” Explained Shadowpaws. Dawnfire narrowed her eyes at him.

“There’s something else isn’t there?” She growled.

“Well...” Shadowpaws moved his face into a shaft of sunlight, his smile looked wider than ever, “you may not see it now, but the pack is dividing.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Two sides. Ever since the lion came some have been pushing for her release, some saying she was nothing more than a prize, tensions are high. Before you know it, we’ll have a war on our paws.” Shadowpaws licked his lips.

“What, over me?” I queried, terrified that I may have started a war among creatures so at peace with others in their pack.

“Not really. There has always been an under current of hatred for the old-ways. Things like the appointment of Redbands, the rules about stolen prey punishment, your arrival just made dogs talk. And words lead to actions...”

“Shadowpaws, what are you telling us this for?” barked Dawnfire.

“Because, I’ll spread the word that the lion needs help delivering messages, I can invite everyone who thinks she should be set free, or at least treated as an equal to meet here. That way we’ll know who’s on what side, the ones who want Hobblestep over here free,

are usually also the ones who are questioning the old ways. The battle lines are being drawn, and I want to know where everyone stands. If helping you is the quickest way to do that, then so be it.” The dog replied coolly, “Shall we meet tonight when the moon is at its highest in the sky?”

Dawfire nodded.

Shadowpaws nodded back, the wide grin still on his face, and ducked out of the hollow tree.

“Do you think he means it?” I asked.

“I don’t know...he seemed to...but we’ll find out when the moon’s highest I guess.”

Dawnfire and I had spent the rest of that day planning ways to escape the territory, in case Shadowpaws was lying and he was going to betray us. The moon sat high in the sky. It’s warm glow cast over the open savanna, bleaching the golden grasses pale silver and greys. We headed toward the pack tree. Dawnfire paused at the entry.

“What if it’s a trap? What if all Shadowpaws did was bring his friends, and they are going to attack us? I wouldn’t put it past him!”

“Dawnfire, if you don’t want to go in, I understand, but I need to know. I mean, if there are enough dogs there, maybe we can even plan a way for me to escape! That’s too big an opportunity to miss.”

“If you go in, I go in Hobblestep. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had, and I’m not abandoning you just because I’m scared...lets go.”

I smiled. It was nice that I’d inspired courage into this timid dog. I just hoped I didn’t lead her to her death. I took a deep breath, and slid under the bush, emerging onto the familiar sandy floor. The dirt was familiar, but I could barely recognize the space so full of dogs! There were at least 20 of them, luckily the space was large, but I never expected to see so many dogs. I didn’t recognize most of them by name. Just sympathetic faces that I would see look at me sadly as they walked by. I did recognize Darksun nestled closely to her mate, who looked less than happy to be there. I spotted Shadowpaws sitting in the middle of them all. He stood up from where he crouched and walked over.

“I almost thought you weren’t going to show up to your own meeting.” He exclaimed, smiling broadly, “These are the dogs who are willing to help you. We have decided to call ourselves The Mir.”

“Mir is just a code name so that dogs don’t catch on to us, they won’t suspect a thing! It means Freedom in the language of the ancients.” Exclaimed Darksun from the crowd. Her mate jabbed her with his elbow and frowned. She just smiled and licked his cheek.

I noticed that Dawnfire was beside me now. She must have snuck in without me noticing. The crowd was silent, I noticed all eyes were on me. I gulped. What was I supposed to say?

“Um...thank you all for coming. It really does mean a lot that so many of you care...” I mumbled nervously.

“Aww it was nothing!” Called one dog.

“Yea! No one should be kept prisoner like you are! Its savage!” Called another.

“Besides, we all love you Hobblestep!” It was Darksun’s voice this time, “You’ve never complained about a thing, and no matter what happens you never let bad feelings get the best of you. Three cheers for Hobblestep!”

Before I knew it the tree rang with dogs chanting my name, the sound echoed around in the tree, bouncing off the walls, and making it sound like there were even more voices calling. For the very first time in my life, I felt wanted, and looked up to. A shy smile crept across my face as the chants grew louder and louder.

Chapter Twenty-five

The Mir had become part of my life. Every week we would meet, deciding who should be on message delivery duty, sometimes trying to find ways for me to escape.

A lot of the time though, they spoke of mutiny against Redband Blackrage. Shadowpaws had stayed in the group for longer than I thought he would. I could slowly see his character transforming.

When I’d first met him, he’d been a rude, and untrustworthy dog. He’d always had that deceitful smile on his face, but now, he had grown into a leader of sorts to the Mir. He often would sit in the center of our circle, and give inspiring speeches about how the old

ways were wrong for his pack, and that leaders should be chosen by the pack, based on what they do, not how they look.

As his personality radically changed, so did his appearance. He'd once tracked around leaves and twigs in his knotted dull pelt. But now, his clean pelt would glimmer in the light that would filter in through the knot holes in the pack tree when he stepped up to speak. He had become almost respectable looking.

One night when our meeting was at a close and everyone was leaving Dawnfire stopped Shadowpaws.

"Hey, great job tonight. I really liked your speech..thing..." She told him, looking at her paws, her eyes darting up to look at him, then down to the sandy ground again.

"Thanks Dawnfire. See you tomorrow" With that he shouldered his way past her, and out the exit. She watched him go with a far off expression.

"Dawnfire, you all right?" I asked.

"Yea...I'm...fine." She murmured, still staring at the exit Shadowpaws had disappeared into. She had an expression that I knew well. It was the sort of expression Darksun never stopped looking at her mate with even though he never indulged her with so much as a smile back. Dawnfire was in love.

I thought about that. No. I must be wrong. I mean, when I'd first met Dawnfire, the one leading the group of dogs who had attacked her, had been him, Shadowpaws. How could she ever forgive something like that? I looked at her quizzically. The expression was still there, clear on her face. 'I MUST be mistaken...' I thought absently, but in the back of my mind, I knew I wasn't.

I nudged Dawnfire gently.

"Come on. Lets go get some sleep." I Said, then left to do just that.

I yawned. It was the next morning. I fell into step beside Dawnfire who was on hunting duty that day with 18 other members of the pack, including Redband Blackrage.

I felt sort of bad around him now. Listing to The Mir plotting to over throw him...it made my heart twist. He wasn't a bad leader. He stuck rigidly to the old ways, true, but that didn't mean he deserved what they were planning for him. It didn't help that I was

gaining favor with him, and that he had started to treat me like an equal. It made me feel like I was betraying a friend. Sometimes I wondered how I'd gotten myself so entwined in my captors' lives.

"Hobblestep?" I heard a voice call. I didn't recognize it. I turned around, and I almost fainted. It was Feather!

He'd grown so much! His voice was deeper, and his red-brown mane was fuller. The pieces of it had connected, and he had a thin, short, but none-the-less, complete mane. He'd grown into his paws, and his face had lost its cub-like chubbiness.

"Feather!" I called, unable to contain my joy at seeing him. At seeing him grown. Dawnfire gave a tiny smile, trying to keep how familiar she was with Feather concealed from Redband Blackrage.

"Guys! Guys she's here!" Feather called out to some foliage behind him. Shimmer's two cubs stepped out. Dapple and Chase. Though, they didn't look much like cubs anymore.

Dapple was long limbed and sleek. She looked confident and walked out with a sureness of her steps, picking over the grasses delicately. Her brother stumbled out behind her. He looked like the opposite of his sister. His eye darting around nervously at the dogs. He had grown up too. He had a messy frill of fur up from the back of his neck to between his shoulders. The maimed side of his face was shining dully in the sunlight.

"Feather, you saw her, that's all you wanted right? Lets get OUT of here! It gives me the creeps..." He hissed to Feather.

"All right, all right. In a little bit. I just wanna talk to her. You guys can go if you want."

"And let you have all the fun? Fat chance. Count me in." Said Dapple, grinning confidently and stepping closer to the border.

Feather beamed at her and bounded forward, and Chase followed them cautiously.

I stepped closer to the border and four dogs quickly blocked my path.

"You may speak to them, but not cross the border." I heard Redband Blackrage say behind me. Fine. I just wanted to talk to Feather. He and Dapple bounded up to the border, as close as they could get with out being nipped by dogs. Chase hung a little further back, looking worried.

"Hobblestep I've missed you!" Feather told me, beaming giddily.

"I've missed you too Feather! You've grown so much!!"

“I-”

I cry cut Feather off.

“FEATHER! DAPPLE!! A lion! There’s a lion coming! I-it looks like the one that killed Strike!!” Bellowed Chase, his voice shaking in terror.

All heads whipped around to see a young No-Mane approaching. He didn’t look very old, if this was the same lion who had attacked Chase’s family, he must have been banished from his original pride at an exceptionally young age.

He had a dark tan coloured pelt. He had a greasy dark chestnut brown mane. It shimmered in the sunlight in an unhealthy looking way.

He had a thick deep scar on his right foreleg. It was obviously made by a lion. The claw marks looked to thick and far apart to be from a lioness. A mane had given him those scars, had it been in a fight for territory? Or had

A shiny piece of Tall-Baboon stuff was fastened around his left forepaw. He had a slimly looking smile on his face. As he turned and I saw his body more clearly I noticed that his mane had grown in strangely. Instead of cleanly framing his face like every other lion I’d met, it ran down his back, and all the way down his tail, connecting into the tuft of fur on his tail. It reminded me of a longer version of a wildebeest’s mane.

As he passed, he looked over at the dogs and made a face.

“Hey, dudes, I’m just passin’ through. Don’t go attacking me or anything, kay? Just lookin’ for a meal.” He said to the dogs, nervously shifting his greasy mane to get a piece of chestnut fur out of his dark blue eyes.

“We have no quarrel with you lion.” Replied Redband Blackrage, absently flicking his ears at the lone lion.

“Looking for a meal? You mean looking for someone to STEAL a meal from!” Snarled Chase in an uncharacteristic act of courage and defiance, “I remember you! I remember your unnatural mane! You killed my brother!”

The lion turned slowly, his navy blue eyes narrowed menacingly at Chase.

“My mane is what now?” He growled in a low tone, baring his yellow teeth and black gums. He unsheathed huge black claws from his big pale tan paws, “Lesson one, never EVER make a comment on the mane.”

He leapt at feather, his paws in front of him, his talon sharp claws extended to their full massive size.

A dark yellow flash streaked out of the bushes, ramming into the No-Mane and knocking him to the ground. It was Shimmer. The No-Mane roared in fury.

I wanted to help them, I charged at the border, but seven dogs blocked me, using their bodies as barriers, then snarling and biting at me when I tried to get closer. They followed me as I paced along to border.

Shimmer panted and looked up defiantly at the No-Mane.

“Stay AWAY from my cub!” She hissed, her fur puffed out, making her look twice her size, but was still dwarfed by the No-Mane.

He roared again, and reared up on his hind legs, forcing himself with all his weight down on Shimmer. But she was too quick. She scooted out of the way, and he lost his balance and fell, hissing as he hit the ground. She sped over and tried to pin him, but he just smiled and rocketed her off of him with his back paws, sending her flying through the air, and crashing down a few pawsteps away. The air was knocked out of her, and while she struggled to become able to breathe again, the No-Mane took his chance and ran over to her, grabbing her in his jaws and shaking her like she was a plaything.

I HAD to get to her. Feather Dapple and Chase were huddled together under a tree, too afraid to move, I was the only one left who could help her! I NEEDED to! I unsheathed my claws and scratched long scars down the faces of the dogs who were blocking me from saving my friend. I charged toward the border, but dog after dog hopped on my back, or ran in front of me, snarling and biting, pushing me backwards while Shimmer was being attacked.

“STOP IT!” I screamed in desperation, as I saw Shimmer’s body go limp in the lions jaws, “I have to help her! WE have to help her! Can’t you see they’re killing her!?”

“Rules are rules. We can’t cross borders” Replied Redband Blackrage calmly to my desperate plea.

“Please!” Tears were streaming down my face as Shimmer’s blood trickled out of the No-Mane’s mouth, making red designs on her yellow fur. Her face was dragging on the ground and had hundreds of tiny cuts from rocks that were being smacked against it from the ground, “We have to HELP her! Dawnfire! Tell them to let me go!” I shrieked, pulling at the jaws that were fastened around my shoulders, and trying to break my way through the wall of dogs keeping me away.

Dawnfire just looked at the ground then whispered, “just look away Hobblestep.”

How could she say that!? Shimmer was dying or DEAD and we were right here, all that time, not doing a THING!

Suddenly Feather seemed to get over his fears and ran at the No-Mane, followed by Dapple and Chase. The No-Mane stopped whipping Shimmer’s limp body around and dropped it, so that he could combat the cubs. She fell in a heap. Blood trickling out of her mouth, creating a small pool of blood under her chin. The No-Mane knocked Feather, Dapple and Chase away from him with just one swipe of his massive paw.

“The cheetah looks dead. Let’s move in on its territory men.” Called Redband Blackrage to the other dogs who swiftly let me go and moved in on the territory. I immediately ran at the lion and went at him with as much as I could. My claws tore into his pelt as I blindly swiped at him. He hissed at me, and ran his claws down my bad shoulder, knocking me to my side.

Dogs came to my rescue. 10 of them made a circle around him, teeth bared, glaring at him.

“Hey, dude, I don’t wanna fight all of you. A cheetah was one thing, but all you guys? I don’t think so.” He said casually walking off.

“Why!” I cried after him, “Why would you kill her? She never did anything to you!”

“What does it matter? She was just a cheetah.” He called back, then ran out of the territory. Just a cheetah? Shimmer had been much more than ‘just a cheetah...’

I got up and walked over to Shimmer’s body. I was trapped in the same trance that had captured me when I’d saw my father die. It was a surrealistic feeling. To see someone die. You almost expect them to be fine when you walk up to them. You can’t get a grip on reality. Or maybe you just don’t want to...

Her body looked small and broken. Her jaw hung open, her brown eyes still wide open, but they were glazed over, the lively light was gone from them, leaving an eternal look of horror on her face, which was twisted in pain. The place where the No-Manes fangs had been imbedded into her was apparent on her pelt. Two huge gashes between her shoulder blades that were bleeding bright blood heavily were there. I jumped backwards as I felt the hot sticky liquid slide onto my paw. I walked over behind Shimmer, examining her fatal wounds. I felt light headed. I had been right there. Only a few tree-lengths away, but I hadn’t been able to do a thing... The sadness and anguish inside me turned to cold, hard

rage. This was Redband Blackrage's doing. I could have saved her. He deserved to die for what he'd let happen to Shimmer.

Dawnfire stepped up beside me.

"Hey, you going to be all right?" She asked.

I closed my eyes.

"Dawnfire, gather The Mir. We are having a meeting. Tonight."

Chapter Twenty-Six

When the Mir had all been gathered, and we sat in the Pack Tree, the cold rage still ran through me.

The anger clouded my thoughts. The only image in my head was one of Blackrage dying. Of his brutal death. He had to pay. He was going to pay, and I was going to be the one to do it. The No-Mane deserved to die too. All Shimmer had done was protect her cub. And now her body lay dead. The dogs hadn't even bothered to move it. They just stepped around it. Didn't they care? Didn't they feel at all? I wanted to scream.

I was in the center of the circle of dogs. All eyes on me. An eerie light filtered into the tree, making shadows on my face, and dipping into my scars, emphasizing them. I dragged my, icy gaze along the circle of dogs. I heard a few of them give tiny whines of fear and my eyes passed them. I must look like a monster. Shimmer's blood on my paws, my eyes filled with the lust to kill, I didn't care if I was frightening. I wanted to be frightening, to strike fear into Redband Blackrage's eyes before I plunged my claws into his heart.

"We have to take action." I hissed lowly, subconsciously unsheathing my claws, which almost looked like they were glowing in the light, "If you are all as unhappy as you claim to be with the way this pack is run, then don't just SIT there. DO something. Take the pack over."

"How do you propose we DO that?" called a dog.

My eyes flashed over to him, and he tucked his tail between his legs and took a step backwards.

“Do it by force. Kill Blackrage. Kill who ever opposes you! I don’t care! Just get it over with and let me OUT of this place!” I roared. I heard what I was saying, but couldn’t believe the rough voice that said the words was me. I didn’t sound like myself. I didn’t feel like myself.

“Hobblestep, that would mean all out civil war! And none of us want to hurt anybody!” Called Dawnfire, her brow creased with worry.

“If civil war is what it takes, then civil war is what it takes. How committed are you to your cause?” I roared, the lust for battle distorting my words into a menacing and crazed tone.

Shadowpaws stepped out of the crowd.

“I think Hobblestep is right. We have to fight for what we want. Sometimes the only way a to get to ultimate peace is through war. If we sit here and talk about it forever, nothing will ever get done. We have to take what we want, if we really do want it.”

I felt a dark pleasure squirm around in my chest at the thought of a war, of killing.

As more and more dogs stepped out to stand beside Shadowpaws and I, the dark joy grew inside me, spinning its dark fingers around my heart. The fact that I was getting so much pleasure out of this scared me. I was afraid of myself. Of my emotions, but that didn’t stop the dark fingers from squeezing harder, and scaring away all thoughts of rationality. Replacing them with anger and hate.

Most of the dogs had moved to our side of the tree and I thrashed my tail from side to side in triumph.

“Ok...” Shadowpaws took control and began to talk about possible ways to strike against Redband Blackrage and those who supported him. They spoke of it for hours, and by that time I had time to take control of my anger, and crush the darkness that had been circulating around my body.

When the meeting was finished, and the Mir broke apart to go to their separate duties, I was afraid. What had I done? In a fit of rage I had become directly responsible for a war. I felt sick and I walked out of the tree. I dragged my paws out to where I usually slept. Dawnfire followed me.

“Hobblestep! Hey, wait up!” She called. I stopped.

“Hobblestep...you scared me today...I’ve never seen that side of you...” She mumbled.

I clenched my jaws, then sighed sadly. I'd scared Dawnfire. I felt worse. My words echoed in my head. The feeling of anger was dim inside of me, a drop of the ocean that had consumed me when I'd spoken to the Mir. I'd only ever felt like that once before, when Spark had been killed. I never wanted to feel the uncontrollable rage again. It scared me. All I felt now was emptiness.

"I'm sorry Dawnfire...I was just...upset..." I murmured.

Dawnfire stayed silent for a minute, then spoke.

"Well before the meeting, a lion came and gave me a message for you near the border. I wanted to tell you about it but...you had this...look. The way you were talking, and the way you were looking at all of us...I don't think anyone would have dared interrupted you. But now you seem...better."

"Oh. What was the message?"

She paused.

"I know you told me not to talk to No-Manes but, he said he knew you..."

"What? A No-Mane?"

"Yes. He said his name was Golden."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Golden? No! It couldn't be! We had parted ways so long ago...I found myself barley able to remember the exact shade of his deep golden eyes. I didn't want to let myself feel the happiness that was twirling around in the pit of my stomach. I couldn't get my hopes up. This couldn't be MY Golden. He'd gone the other way, the complete opposite direction than me.

"Dawnfire are you CERTAIN that he said his name was golden?"

"Of course I am! If I weren't certain I wouldn't even be telling you."

"Well...what did he look like?"

"Uh, yellowish fur, orangish goldish mane. I don't know!"

That sounded like Golden. I gulped. Could it truly be him?

“Well...what was his message??”

“He said he wanted to meet with you.”

My heart skipped a beat. All my suspicions that it wasn't him vanished.

He wanted to meet with me! I may get to see Golden! I felt like I could fly. I felt a huge smile spread across my face.

“I would LOVE to meet with him!”

“So...you know him?”

“Yes, yes! I know him VERY well!!”

Dawnfire looked nervous.

“What?” I asked, my heart plummeting, at her worried expression. Did that mean we couldn't meet? But I need to see him! I HAD to! “We CAN meet can't we?”

“Yes...but....”

“But what!?”

“I can sneak him in, but not you out....but...that lion that killed your cheetah friend...if someone like that was lose here...we wouldn't stand a chance...I just don't want anyone to get hurt...”

“Dawnfire, I PROMISE Golden won't hurt anybody! Please, please help me meet with him Dawnfire!” I pleaded. She frowned. Her blue eyes probed me. Exactly the same as when we had first met. I prayed that she would say yes.

“Ok...f-fine. I can bring him in tonight.”

I was so happy that I leapt in the air in a fit of joy and landed lightly on my paws. I waved my tail in the air and paced back and fourth.

“Do we have to wait until the night??” I asked impatiently.

“Yes. The guards will be too alert right now.”

Frustration flashed inside me. It wouldn't be long until nightfall. The sun was low in the sky, but every second felt like years as I waited for the night to come. I couldn't stop pacing, and moving. Weaving my way around the territory impatient for the time to be right. Had Golden changed? Had I changed? It had been so long! Would I even recognize him? Finally when the moon was almost at it's highest, Dawnfire walked up to me quietly.

"I've spoken to Golden again. We have agreed on a way to get him in. Go wait in the heart of our territory, and I'll bring him to you." She whispered, then disappeared into the shadows. The heart. That was code name for a wide open spaces in the middle. The ground there was packed down from the paws of generations of pups. It was a place used for training pups in the ways of the pack, but since there were none of the right age, the space was usually empty.

I sat and waited. More waiting. I kneaded my claws into the dry soil. Suddenly I heard pawsteps behind me. I whipped my head around. I saw the dull figure of a dog, and one of full grown lion. They stepped out of the shadows.

The lion was massive, and had a pelt of gold. His bright gold mane quivered in the slight breeze. He stood with a quiet majesty and nobility. He had a broad cream coloured muzzle, and was wearing a smile I knew well. I could scarcely believe it, but it was Golden. He was there. Standing in front of me. His smiling his perfect smile at me. It made me feel like I had been in a block of ice and didn't even notice until it was melted away for me by his warm amber gaze.

I was so happy to see him that I ran at him so fast that I couldn't stop in time and tripped, careening into him, and knocking him over. I landed beside him and blushed heavily. He laughed a deep, hearty laugh beside me. I laughed too, though a little nervously at him being so close to me as we lay on the ground.

He gave me a lick on the chin and smiled broadly.

My tail shot out straight behind me in surprise. Had that really happened? Was I dreaming? If I was I never wanted to wake up.

I nuzzled him in the neck in response, making the lion version of a purr, which sounded a like a pleased groan.

"You have no idea how hard it was to find you..." murmured Golden.

"You mean you were LOOKING for me?" I asked in astonishment.

He laughed.

“Of course I was. As soon as I heard you were out of the pride, I knew I’d made a mistake in not taking me with you, and I’ve been looking for you ever since. I found Feather and some cheetahs this morning – don’t worry, they’re safe - they told me you were here. I can’t believe that I’ve finally found you.”

I smiled shyly, I still couldn’t believe he’d come all this way for me! An ugly little cripple. The world worked in such strange ways...

“How DID you find out I was kicked out anyway?” I asked, because I wasn’t sure how to respond to what he’d just said.

“Hover told me. Man, your lucky to have her as a friend. She left the territory and came and found me. She told me you had been kicked out of the pride. She said you, er, really liked me, and that you would start a pride with me. That’s what I’ve wanted for a long time, but I hadn’t ever had the courage to ask...”

That’s it. I must be dreaming. I HAD to be. I didn’t feel like I could fly, I COULD fly. My eyes watered. He wanted to start a pride with me? GOLDEN wanted to start a pride with me? This was the happiest moment of my life.

“Are you asking now...?” I asked quietly, letting myself get lost in the depths of his amber eyes.

“I think I am. Are you saying yes?”

I giggled in pure bliss.

“I think I am.” I curled up closer to him and he made a lion purr. I rested my muzzle in his mane, taking in his scent that I’d missed so much. When I got out of here, I would be the happiest lioness in the world. I’d have a pride with the lion I loved, and everything bad in my life would just go away. I knew it would. The world was finally working in my favor.

“We have to get him out of here.” Said Dawnfire suddenly.

“Huh?”

“Blackband Shadowsun will be doing rounds soon, Golden has to leave.”

“But he just got here! Can’t we go to the Pack Tree? Or- “

“No, he HAS to get out of here NOW. They’ll pick up his scent and we’ll get caught.”

Golden got up and shook the soil out of his magnificent mane. I stood up too. I didn't want to be away from him! Never again! Dawnfire began to escort him out.

"Hobbs, I'll get you out of here. No matter what it takes, I'll get you out of here. I...I love you!" He called.

I shiver ran up my spine. The last lion to say that had been Sixmane. A little guilt stabbed me. Why didn't I have the same doubts about being in Golden's pride as I had Sixmane's? Maybe I just knew Sixmane wasn't the one for me, and was finding excuses to get away from him. I don't know. But it felt strange to have heard the words from two lions. I'd once thought I'd never be loved, and now there were TWO that had been able to see past my exterior, and for what ever reason, like what was there.

"I love you too Golden!" I called after him. I promised myself I'd get out of here, and start a pride with him.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

For the next few days Golden sent me more messages then you would believe! He'd tell me he missed me every moment I wasn't beside him, and that he was working on a way to get me out. Sometimes he'd send a message just to say he loved me, or just to show he was thinking of me.

It made me feel like I could launch myself off the ground and soar anywhere I wanted. Though, I wouldn't soar very far if I could. Just over the border and to Golden. I'd fall asleep with this happy feeling in the pit of my stomach that made even the hard packed earth feel like the most luxurious grassy sleeping area.

Then one day Shadowpaws called a surprise meeting of the Mir. We all gathered in the tree. As usual, he stood at the center of the circle, directly below the thin beams of moonlight cascading down.

"Dogs of the Mir. I have been conversing with many of you outside of our meetings, and from combining all of the views I've heard, and holding small meetings with some of you, I have decided the date, and tactics of our battle."

Surprised murmurs rippled through the group of assembled dogs. I looked around at them. Most of them had scars that stretched down their muzzles from small skirmishes about who ate prey first, and petty arguments, but none of them had ever tried to seriously injure one another. War inside a pack was unheard of. I could feel the air in the

tree become thick with fear, and doubt. High pitched whines erupted out of some of the more distressed dogs.

“Calm! Friends! Calm. Think about it. A battle is the only way to abolish the old ways. You seemed to agree with me a few short moonrises ago!”

“But so soon?” Called Darksun’s mate.

“If we don’t do it soon, someone’s tongue is bound to slip, and then all we created the Mir for will be gone. The Mir itself will be gone. Do any of you want that? Please, listen.”

The crowd quieted down, but the cloud of tension still hung in the air.

“That’s better. Now, since we started the Mir, it has grown. Gaining popularity, until, we make up over half the pack. If we make a surprise strike, Blackrage and Shadowsun will have no escape, and will be forced to give up very early on in the battle. Barley any blood will be spilled.” He promised.

I could see through it. He had no idea what percentage of the pack the Mir made up. And, the dogs in the Mir, were mostly idealistic, not fighters. The big muscular dogs were the ones who followed orders without question. Dogs like Shadowsun. And I knew that Redband Blackrage wouldn’t give up early in the battle. It would be a bloody and ugly all out war. The thought of it made me sick. Knowing that I’d started it all. Not just the notion of the battle, but the Mir itself. I thought back to when Shadowpaws had first spoken to us, ‘You just got them talking, and words lead to actions...’. I’d gotten them talking, gotten them into this rebel group, and forced them into having the mind set that war was the only way to get what they wanted. I shivered when I heard Dawnfire step out from beside me and into the center beside Shadowpaws.

“I believe in him. I know what ever he thinks will work, will work. I will fight with him until the end.” She said, her usually quiet, meek voice was loud, and clear. It radiated off the ancient bark walls of the tree. Shadowpaws glanced at her appreciatively and she met his gaze for only a moment before letting her eyes slip to the sandy ground.

“I too will stand with them. I’m not afraid of a fight.” Said one of the brawnier members of the Mir. Going to stand beside them. Each dog individually made their oath to stand by Shadowpaws, until there was only a handful of dogs left looking uncertain, two of them being Darksun and her mate. Darksun was whispering encouragingly to him, but he was shaking his head doubtfully. Finally she dragged him out into the center.

“We’ll fight!” She said, her always loud, always strong voice was excited at the notion of a battle. She wagged her tail.

“Darksun! I said no! It’s not a good idea!” growled her mate, yanking on her grip.

“Oh come on. It’ll be fine. C’mon. Let’s go sit with the others.” She said to him, dragging him over to the side that said they would fight. He let her drag him, but didn’t look happy at all about it. He didn’t look like a very good fighter. He had a thin frame and doubtful eyes. I didn’t trust him. He seemed like the type that would betray us just so that he wouldn’t have to fight. I made a mental note to keep an eye on him. Shadowpaws addressed to few dogs who reminded on the ‘not fighting side’.

“Those of you who don’t wish to fight with us, I won’t ask to fight against us. Please, vacate the immediate area of the Pack Tree today, we will strike within the next few days. He told them. His dark orange eyes glinted in the darkness. For a split second, they looked vicious, and blood crazed, and all the things I thought made up his personality before the Mir, but after that split second, it was gone.

They filed out of the tree quietly.

Shadowpaws turned to the dogs who would be fighting.

“The sooner we fight, the better. I say the day after tomorrow, after a meeting here when the sun is gone and the moon at it’s lowest, we strike. Attacking a sleeping enemy is not honourable, but if we strike when they are tired, we gain a tactical advantage. Everyone rest up before then, and be at your best. I promise, we will win this battle. No matter what it takes.”

The dogs let out a cheer of their agreement, then all at once began to leave the tree, going to get some rest, so they could be at their best on the day of the battle. Shadowpaws stopped Dawnfire on the way out.

“Hey, I wanted to thank you personally for helping me out. I don’t know if anyone would have agreed if it weren’t for you...so...thanks.” He said, “You know you’re not so bad for the daughter of a guy who was hated by the gods.”

If I’d been her I’d have slapped him across the muzzle for talking about her father like that. But of course, I’m not her, and she said,

“Um...thank you....I’ve been meaning to tell you something...”

She didn’t actually LIKE him did she? He’d just called her father hated by the gods, he’d helped brutally murder him, he’d attacked her, and she was about to tell him she loved him. I knew she was going to.

“Yea? What?”

“I...you...Um...I’ll stick by you in the battle. And you’re a really great dog, and-”

He cut her off by licking the bridge of her nose and smiling sweetly at her. I had to resist my urge to hiss. I knew he was leading the Mir to believe they could win the battle easily, with very little blood shed, but I knew he was just deceiving them. He would sacrifice the lives of his loyal followers to become leader of the pack. That was his motive. Dawnfire was too good for him. She didn’t seem to care that she was falling for a deceitful snake of a dog. My ears pressed down to my head, and I squeezed out of the tree, not wanting to see or hear more.

The next day passed uneventfully. The calm before the storm I suppose. It was odd. Seeing so many dogs acting normal. Being normal. But why shouldn’t they? As far as they were concerned, there wasn’t anything out of the ordinary going on. They had no idea that they may not come out of the next day alive. It pained me, but what could I do? If I told anyone, they would round up the dogs in the Mir, and maybe execute them, but, they would fight back, and it would lead to a bloodier battle. I wanted so very badly to just get out of there. To live a quiet, peaceful, uneventful life with Golden.

The Mir were gathered in the tree. We were getting ready to attack. It was the big day. The one some had been dreading, and some looking forward to with a passion.

“Are you all ready?” Asked Shadowpaws, his voice hushed, but intense. Dawnfire sat at his side. Ever since the last meeting, she had been attached to him like one of those little birds that sat on rhino’s backs. She looked determined to fight with Shadowpaws, and win for him. Most of the dogs seemed nervous, but well rested, and as ready as they would ever be.

I felt dizzy. I wasn’t sure if I was expected to fight as well. I guessed so. I looked at each of the long faces of the dogs. I’d gotten to know most of them. And they me. Some of them wouldn’t survive. It hurt me to know I would never see some of these battle scarred faces again, or if so, cold and mangled on the ground.

“Right. Lets go then.” Growled Shadowpaws solemnly, leading the way out of the tree, and out to the pack. We followed, and stood behind him. My muscles tensed. In a few moments this quiet valley would explode in chaos, and I would be caught in the middle of it.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Shadowpaws stood, head held high. The dogs that weren't in the Mir looked up at us curiously from their nests, it looked like most of them were just about to go to sleep. The sun had just set spreading blood red fingers of light up from the horizon over a dark blue sky. The clouds were pink, but stained red at the parts nearest to the eerie red lights. My stomach churned. Why was I even here? I didn't trust Shadowpaws as a leader. 'But if I don't stand by the Mir, I may never get out of here. I'll just have to follow him for a little longer.' I thought.

Redband Blackrage approached us.

"What are all of you doing?" He asked quizzically. He had his harmless face on.

"We want to drop the old ways, and make new rules, that WE create, not some long dead dogs." Shadowpaws told him calmly.

"You know that's out of the question! The ancient rules are what our culture is BUILT on!" Barked Redband Blackrage angrily, "I've heard all of it before from you, the answer is still NO!"

"Then you leave us no choice. We'll take command of this pack ourselves, by force." He growled darkly. The blood thirsty glint I'd spotted in his eyes earlier was back. He stared down his dumbfounded leader.

"Mutiny?" He whispered.

A smile spread across Shadowpaws' black muzzle.

"Mutiny."

The dogs who had been sitting and watching quietly got up all at once, snarling and baring their teeth.

"Have you all no honour? Mutiny is the lowest you can get! You dirty rats!" Snarled Blackband Shadowsun aggressively, "I'll kill every last one of you!"

He jumped on the member of the Mir who happened to be closest and started tearing at him viciously. Savage growls broke out from both sides and the sides ran at each other. It all happened so fast, I felt rooted in place. The battle had begun. I looked around the group of fighting dogs, I didn't know what to do! They were all moving so fast, blotchy pelts blending into blotchy pelts, they all looked the same! All I could do was helplessly watch.

Suddenly one dog flew out from the mass of canines and landed on my back, it began tearing at my skin. I hissed in surprise and threw it off. It was catapulted into the air, and to my surprise, got caught in one of the branches of The Pack tree. A thick branch of the tree drove its way through the dog's chest, he whimpered in pain as he was impaled by the massive plant. His blood dripped down on two dogs who were fighting below and they became covered in it. I gasped.

Another dog let out a cry of outrage and jumped at me. I dodged her and she slid on the ground. She bared her teeth, her eyes full of pure rage and launched herself at me again. Without thinking my forepaw flew out and deflected her, knocking her to the ground again.

"What's wrong lion-pet? Don't want to FIGHT? Why not go on the offensive for a while." She snarled, going at me again, and again I deflected her with my paw.

"Oh come on. Put up more of a fight. You're just like your cheetah friend. You think too much, fight too little. You're a weak little cripple, and you're ugly. How'd you get the scars? Come across a big bad cactus?" She growled, her belly pressed to the ground, her face scrunched up and her ears pressed back against her ears.

It may have been the smell of blood, or maybe it was because such savage feelings from the dogs were all around me, but when she said the word cripple I wasn't me anymore. I was an angry lion, who wanted to kill the pathetic dog that crouched at my feet, smiling smugly at me with her teeth.

I unsheathed my big black claws and tore them down her side, her bright red blood splattered onto my chest and she gave a whine of pain. I took another step closer.

"Ugly? I'll make YOU ugly." I hissed menacingly, and slashed at her again, this time on the face. I tore off the skin on her muzzle, leaving her teeth forever exposed. I slashed off one of her ears. She curled up in a defeated little ball and whimpered quietly as she bled. I was tempted to kill her, but I decided to hope she lived, she would be for ever ugly. Just like me. The dark pleasure at her pain consumed me, this time I didn't even try to stop it. I just let myself swim in the black cloud of blood lust.

I heard a heart broken cry burst out of the crowd of dogs. I ran towards it. It was Darksun. She was wailing her heart out. Stepping closer I saw that her mate lay dead at her paws. She screamed, no words, just a horrible, ugly scream of pain. Her whole body shook as she mourned for her mate. Out of nowhere, Redband Blackrage attacked her. His face was the opposite of harmless now. It was twisted in a cruel smile. His muzzle was coated with blood, and he pinned Darksun. How DARE he attack her while she mourned for her mate. I picked him up, right off Darksun. He struggled out of my jaws and ran. The coward.

The outrage I'd felt when Shimmer had died came back. It flowed through my muscles, stronger, more directed than what the female dog who I'd crippled had created. I ran after him. He would have been faster than me, had he been a lion, but since his legs were shorter than mine, I caught up to him with out a problem. We ended up near the water hole of the territory. I cornered him against a big boulder that was just on the bank of the water. I don't know what I looked like, it must have been frightening, for his eyes widened in terror. He muttered pleas for his life incoherently, I didn't even try to understand. This was just how I'd planned it...the fear in his eyes was perfect. I grabbed him up in my jaws, and shook him. He would die the same way Shimmer had. He used all of his strength to break my grip again, and ran into the water hole. I was about to give chase, when a log suddenly wasn't a log anymore. It was a crocodile, lying in wait. All at once it thrust its way out of the water and clamped its massive mouth around Redband Blackrage's head. It bit down and his skull cracked like an egg. He let out one last cry of pain before being pulled under the water by the deadly reptile. A cloud of red blood followed him as the crocodile swam into deeper waters to devour its prey.

Thinking about it now, I don't think anyone should die that way. It was terrible, and he didn't deserve it. But, right then, I felt triumph. As if the crocodiles were even on my side. But, the cloud of blood lust he'd created in me didn't die when he did. To my own horror, I ran back to the battlefield, to kill more.

Chapter Thirty

The battle raged on all through the night and ended two nights later. When it was over, the Mir did win. I didn't feel victorious. I couldn't look at my own reflection without being sickened with what I saw. No new scars, just the fact that I was a killer. I couldn't control my temper anymore. I thought there must be something wrong with me. I had killed over 14 dogs. I'd been PLEASED to kill them. It scared the hell out of me.

Shadowpaws held a grand ceremony for his new appointment as leader. He'd declared that leaders would no longer be chosen based on outward appearance, but on the opinion of the pack it self. He also declared that there would be no more second in command, this decision puzzled me, but didn't really matter to me. He also mentioned that I'd been very valuable in the fight. I just stared down at my paws when he said it. The entire pack had gathered, there had been joy in the air, dogs were happy and celebrating. I hadn't been able to force myself to share the feeling. I just felt empty. I wondered if I'd have gotten more satisfaction out of Redband Blackrage's death if I'd done it myself. Probably not. Seeing him dragged away by a crocodile had made me feel triumphant, and happy for about an hour, but after that, all I felt was this emptiness.

I was glad I was going to get out of here as soon as Shadowpaws had established his rein. I'd had enough of these dogs and their endless list of problems. I felt more trapped than ever. Dawnfire hadn't spoken to me since the battle. All she did was stick to Shadowpaws like a parasite.

The only one of the dogs who didn't seem to be happy with the outcome of the battle was Darksun. I wasn't as close to her as I'd been to Dawnfire, but she was my friend, and it hurt me to see the same emptiness I felt reflected in her eyes. Before the battle they'd had such a lively glint in them. She'd always been positive and light hearted, but now she had a sort of droop to her. Everything she did seemed forced. Like she wasn't really there. Most of her seemed to have died at the same time as her mate. A few days after the battle I went to Shadowpaws.

"Why hello Hobblstep! How are you?" He smiled as I approached.

"When can I leave?" I asked, I didn't want to engage in small talk. I just wanted to get out of there.
He paused.

"Well?" I hissed impatiently.

"Not for a while...quite a while..."

"WHAT?! You can't DO that! The whole point the Mir was started was so that I could be free!" I roared.

He smiled.

"I'm leader now. I can do what ever I want."

Those were almost the exact same words Blackrage had said to me when I'd first arrived. So long ago. I roared as loud as I could and leaped at him. Immediately dogs surrounded me from all angles and forced me to get off their leader. I unsheathed my claws and dug them into the ground.

"You promised you'd let me go once you were leader!"

"I didn't promise you anything. I simply implied it." He grinned back at my outraged face. I saw Dawnfire beside him. She didn't look like she cared at all. That back stabbing snake! I turned my rage on her.

"Dawnfire, tell him! Tell him to let me GO!" I roared at her.

“Why would I do that? Whatever Shadowpaws thinks is best, is best.” She said simply, shifting her position to sit closer to him.

I wanted to smack some sense into her. Couldn't she hear herself?? She sounded like she was just a crowd follower. With no mind of her own. That wasn't the Dawnfire I knew! Or...was it? Maybe this crowd follower had been the dog I'd know all along. The only reason she wasn't following the crowd was because she wasn't welcome in it. But now that she had gained favor with the leader, she didn't need to have her own thoughts, all she had to do was agree with his. To think I'd befriended that worm of a dog. I gave a growl at the two, and stalked off to my sleeping area.

Darksun fell into step beside me. I looked down at her. She didn't say a thing, just walked silently beside me. When I stopped, she stopped, when I sat down, she sat down beside me. I was too angry with all dogs to be curious as to what this one was doing. So I just pretended she wasn't there, and went to sleep.

I awoke to the feeling of teeth ripping into my pelt. My eyes flew open and I hissed in pain. I stood up and shook the dog off me. I turned around to face my opponent. My eyes widened in shock when I saw her.

It was the dog who had taunted me in the battle. Her face was horrifically mutilated. The skin all scabbed over and pussing looked more like crocodile scales than the skin of a dog. One of her eyes only opened half way and was swollen, dwarfing the other eye and making her face look uneven and frightening. She crouched on the ground in front of me.

“You see what you've DONE to me? My mate left me today. My friends fear me, I'm going to KILL you!” She snarled, foaming at the mouth with rage. She leapt at me, and I didn't even have to deflect her. Her half closed eye must have been throwing her off for she missed me completely. She stood up to jump at me again when Darksun walked out in front of her, blocking her path.

“That's enough Shallowriver.” She growled lowly. Her voice in monotone.

Shallowriver glared at her.

“How can you stand up for her? She did THIS to me! This! I was once beautiful!” She barked hoarsely.

“Leave it.” Darksun bared her white teeth at the smaller dog. Shallowriver gave a distressed whine, and ran away.

Dark sun sighed and went to lie back down beside me. What was she my body guard now?

“Darksun?”

“Yes?”

“Why did you do that for me?”

“That’s what friends do...”

She’d always been my friend, but not that close. Why was she doing this now?

“You’re the only friend I have left Hobblestep.” She said after a long pause.

“What? All your friends couldn’t have been killed in the battle!” I whispered disbelievingly.

“They may as well have...” She mumbled.

“Why?”

“None of them believe me...”

“Believe you about what?”

“That Shadowpaws killed my mate, and he shouldn’t be our new leader!”

Chapter Thirty-One

“What? He KILLED your mate?? But they were on the same side!” I hissed in a confused whisper.

“His scent was all over him. I know he did it.”

“Darksun, even if he did kill him, it-it must have been a mistake! It HAD to have been!”

“How can you stand up for him like that? He just sentenced you to stay here, breaking his word. Blackrage would never have done that. The pack doesn’t know what its gotten into by letting Shadowpaws lead...”

“I’m not standing up for him. I just...don’t think he’s a murderer. I mean, why would he purposely kill your mate?”

“He saw too much” Answered Darksun darkly. Her eyes focused on a far off place, “He said that he didn’t want to fight anymore. He was always the peaceful type, he hated fighting and he was...sensitive to feelings. Having dogs being in pain and dying all around him was too much I guess. He didn’t want to be on the battle field any more, so he decided to wait out the battle in the pack tree...” Her tone grew quieter and quieter until her voice had disappeared. What did her mate not fighting have to do with his death?

“Darksun, what happened then?” I prompted.

“I...I called him a coward. He said he didn’t want to be in the battle in the first place, and that he only agreed to come into the fighting because of me. I...said some...harsh things to him....and...” her face twisted in a look of horrible pain and tears streamed down her dark brown face, “ He told me he wished he’d never met me. That I was incorrigible and childish. I told him I never wanted to see him again...and he ran off... into the pack tree....”

How did this relate at all to his death? I wondered as I watched the poor dog shake in the agony of the memory.

“The next time I saw him he was covered in blood running out of the pack tree. He collapsed at my feet and said something about Shadowpaws and Shadowsun, then he....he...” Her body shook more violently and she clenched her jaw, trying to keep herself together, “Um, so I went into the pack tree, it was covered in Shadowpaws’ scent, and Shadowsun’s body was in the corner. It was torn up like you wouldn’t believe. The way he was killed, it wasn’t just to kill him, he was mutilated. Horribly, horribly mutilated. His face was ripped apart so bad that you couldn’t tell his eyes from his nose. He had bite marks and tears in the skin all over his body. And all four of his paws were....” She took a sharp intake of breath, “They were torn off, right at where the black bands on the started. There was blood...so much blood...” She whispered. Her eyes were afraid. She looked hallow. Like the battle had scooped out all of the Darksun I’d known, and leaving the broken shell. “My mate Blackgrass must have seen Shadowpaws kill his brother, and do all that to his body. So, he killed him. I know he did.” Her voice died into an enraged whisper when she spoke of her mate, then faded completely.

Her story made sense to me. It was a well known fact that Shadowpaws had always hated his brother with a passion, because he was the one chosen to be Blackband because he had black bands around his paws, rather than fully black paws. Shadowpaws had a sadistic side to him that I’d seen when he had attacked Dawnfire and ripped the fur off her paws. It seemed plausible that he’d do a similar but more...gory...version of the same thing to his brother after he killed him. The thought sent shivers up my spine. A sadistic murderer leading the pack. Darksun found her voice and spoke again.

“When I tried to tell the others, no one believed me. Shadowsun’s body was gone when I tried to show them, and the blood stains were mixed into the sand. They all think I’ve gone mad because of Blackgrass’s death, but I haven’t! Shadowpaws is a cold blooded killer and I am going to show them all that its TRUE!” Her voice was gaining intensity. “A life for a life Hobblestep. I’m going to kill Shadowpaws.” Her eyes grew dark, with a hatred I’d never have thought possible to fit on such a usually friendly face. “It’s the least I can do to avenge Blackgrass...” She added quietly.

I decided I believed her. I’d rather be against Shadowpaws than with him.

“And ever wonder why he made it so that there is no more second in command? It’s so that he doesn’t have to obey any one. He has absolute power over this pack, and I’m sure he won’t use it to better it.” Growled Darksun.

I looked up at the sky and saw that the moon was rising above the horizon, and the sun was almost gone under the black outline of the far away grasses. I felt a longing to go to the horizon. To be away from the never ceasing DRAMA of this pack. It wasn’t right. To have so much tragedy everywhere. I rested my muzzle on my paws.

“I’m going to sleep for the night.” I mumbled to Darksun, who wordlessly circled three times then lay down beside me.

“Night Hobblestep. We shall see what the morning brings.”

I wondered what that was supposed to mean, but before I could think to hard, drifted off in a troubled sleep.

I awoke the next morning to bustling of many dogs. Not as many as there used to be of course, almost a quarter of the packs population had died as a result of the battle. I shook some sand off of my muzzle and looked at Darksun who was sitting up, and staring hatefully at Shadowpaws, who was sitting on one of the Pack Tree’s thick roots that stuck up from under ground. Beside him, not on a root and noticeably lower, was Dawnfire.

“What’s going on?” I asked sleepily.

“Shadowpaws called a meeting. The dumb male found that root to stand on so that he’s higher than the rest of us. Come on. Lets go see what he has to say.” She got up, not bothering to smooth out her ruffled pelt. I got up too, gave a quick lick to my chest fur and followed her. The entire pack was assembled now. Gathered around the Pack Tree.

“Friends. I’ve had a dream this night.” He called, his voice ringing loud and clear, “Oblak, the god of wet season, clouds, and peace, has come to me. He told me rules, new rules I must lay down, and if you all follow them precisely, this wet season will be the most fruitful of any you have ever seen.” He began. He kept speaking, but I turned my attention away from him to look at Darksun who snarled quietly beside me.

“He’s fooling them. Damn his way with words. Ha. To think his sly tongue convinced me to fight a battle for absolutely no reason now that I think of it. But he made me believe... now he’s doing the same thing to the pack. I don’t like this Hobblestep. Not at all.”

I tuned back into Shadowpaws speaking to hear the end.

“So do not be alarmed when I begin to put these new rules into action. It is the will of the gods. Thank you.” He dismissed the pack. I heard them murmuring doubtfully to one another, but no one said anything to Shadowpaws’ face.

Later that day I was out on a hunting patrol. I gave the death bite to the prey, and stepped back so that the dogs could eat.

Shadowpaws ate first, since he was the leader. When Redband Blackrage had finished his meal, the rest of the pack would gather, a who ever got to the food first, would eat it first. Apperently this was not so with Shadowpaws. The pack was crowding around the kill when he snarled and chased the others back.

“The ones who eat next will be the ones I SAY can eat next.” He snarled at his obedient pack. One by one, he called up his friends. One of the dogs sat down nervously.

“How do we get the right to eat sooner Shadowpaws?” It asked nervously.

“The better you serve your leader, the sooner you get to eat.” He said loud enough so the entire pack could hear, smiling his slimy smile. Though I hate to admit it, what he was doing was clever. By letting those most loyal to him eat first, he was encouraging

“That’s not right Shadowpaws!” Barked Darksun hostilely.

“I decided what’s right! I’m leader!” He snarled back.

“You’re going to lead this pack to its death with your ‘leading’” She growled, her tail bravely up in the air, in a stance on dominance, and fearlessness. Shadowpaws was enraged by her remarks and attacked her on the spot. She screamed, but no one seemed to

care. He got up off her, his muzzle lightly bloodied. He hadn't cut her deep. That was good. I crouched by her motionless body to make sure she was all right. She seemed ok. No fatal wounds. I looked around at her pack mates. Some gave curious glances down at her, but most didn't care enough to look. Everyone really did think she was mad. They just assumed she didn't know what she was talking about. She woke up slowly. Shadowpaws noticed and walked over.

"You will eat LAST" He said, making sure the pack heard, "That kind of disrespect is unacceptable."

She glared up at him but didn't speak.

After every dog had finished, the only ones left at the kill site were Shadowpaws, Dawnfire (who never left his side), Darksun and I. Darksun stepped up cautiously to take a bite of what little was left of the prey, but Shadowpaws forced her back viciously.

"I said LAST. The vultures haven't eaten yet." A cruel grin spread across his face, and Dawnfire let her mouth curve into a half smile as well. I tried to contain my anger, but I couldn't. That was unfair. And Dawnfire had been my friend, look at what he'd DONE to her. I roared, and leapt onto Shadowpaws. He yelped in surprise and pain. I slashed my claws down his side, making him bleed heavily. He gave a loud howl and immediately his group of followers was at his side, blocking me from him.

"She attacked me. Kill her." He growled, licking his wound. I gasped. There were fifteen dogs smiling darkly at me, and edging closer. I searched Dawnfire's face for any indication of emotion, she was my only chance, but there was nothing.

Darksun took a defensive stance in front of me. But I knew that she would die with me if she fought with me. I gulped. Was this how it ended? All that I'd survived, all I'd lived through, ending because of a dispute over prey? Figures.

Suddenly a loud roar sounded from behind us. My head whipped around and I saw the most amazing sight I could ever hope to lay my eyes on.

It was Golden. His mane caught the light and lit up, illuminating his face, and blowing in the wind.

"Let her GO!" He bellowed, and rushed in front of me.

"Kill him too." Grinned Shadowpaws with out a moment's hesitation.

His dogs' eyes glinted with something I didn't recognize. These weren't the dogs I'd been living with for the last two weeks. These were just animals. Angry animals. Not a trace of what I'd come to know in any of them left in their eyes.

I gulped. Golden turned to me and whispered,

"When the fighting starts, run. As fast as you can. I'll hold them off."

Moments later dogs flew at us. He gave a huge, brave roar and made sure none of them touched me. Darksun yanked me away.

"You heard him, RUN." She growled at me, dragging me farther and farther. The dogs were piling onto him. They were killing him.

"No! Darksun they're killing him! I have to help him!" I whimpered.

"If you don't leave and he dies, his death will be in vain. Now get OUT of here." She snarled. I hadn't noticed how close the kill site had been to the border. We were there. I took a last look at Golden, some of the dogs were getting off him and running our direction.

"Go! NOW!" Barked Darksun urgently, biting my tail, making run over the border, "Get as far away from here as you can Hobblestep. Just get far, far away. Come and meet me here in Wet Season, I'll tell you if Golden lived then," She glanced behind us, the dogs were almost here, "You can find him. Now GO!"

I nodded in a daze, turned, and ran, my heart begged me to turn back and help Golden, but if I did, what he was doing would be in vain. I would die too. I had to get out of here, and hope both he and I would survive until Wet Season. We would find each other. We had to.

Chapter Thirty-Two

I ran until my legs could carry me no further. I felt like part of me had died. How pathetic I was. I'd run. I had to hope Golden and I both lived until Wet Season far away from him. 'What a loving thing to do'. I thought bitterly.

I panted exhaustedly. My throat felt raw and every muscle on me hurt. I'd been running for six hours. The night had come.

I walked aimlessly through the open savanna for the next few days. I didn't bother trying to scare hyenas off their prey. There were no hyenas left anyway. All of them had left this empty wasteland. Even the hardy savanna grasses in these parts had died. The trees,

usually strong, unwavering, were shriveled up and dead. I hadn't had water since I left the pack. This place was horrible. No prey, no water, no hope. I walked to the trees. I needed shade. I went underneath one of the pitifully dry plants. I heard a loud snap. Before I knew it, then dead tree was falling on top of me. It crashed down on me. I hissed in surprise and it knocked me to the ground. The breath was knocked out of me. Once I could breath again, I lay there. Nothing felt broken. Just a few scratches. Nothing terrible. I was horrified to find that this was to my displeasure, and I didn't WANT to lift the fallen tree off of me and keep going.

I wanted to die. What was the point of this? All I ever did was run. I had nothing left to live for. Golden was probably dead. Hover hated me. Feather was gone. And here I was. Alone in the world. A shiver crept up my spine as I thought about how alone I really was. I'd always had SOMEONE to be with. Something to make me keep going. I'd had Hover, then Silentsneak, then Feather, then my friends in the dog pack. But here and now, it was lonely. I closed my eyes slowly. I slowed my breathing. If this tree sat on me long enough, maybe it would kill me slowly. Gently. Then I'd be with Spark. Then I'd stop being in everyone's way. I let my eye lids slide closed, and felt the numbness of sleep seep over me like the tides of a water hole to sand.

I found myself in a pure white place. I placed my bad paw on the cold, smooth surface of the ground. Nothing. I knew where I was. This was where I'd seen my dead brother and father - Spark and Starmane - before. Did that mean I was dead? No. I remember the way death felt. It wasn't this white place. It was black there. And I didn't stand there, I floated. Death was more relaxing. More care free. That meant I was still alive. That Spark, or Starmane had brought me here. I dug my claws into the cool ground.

"What do you want?" I called into the nothingness. No response. "Spark? Starmane? Hello?" I cried into the white. Nothing.

"Looking for someone?" I heard a dark voice ask from behind me. I whipped around. It was Redband Blackrage. I stared at him. Awe struck.

"Surprised?" He asked coolly.

"Well....uh....yes..."

"Imagine MY surprise when you turned on me. Do you know the hate that filled your eyes? I'd assume not." He cocked his head to the side, wearing his harmless face. "You had the hatred of Sunce in your eyes. I could see her there. I've never had such a strong vision of her. I was terrified. It was a release from that hate when I was killed by a crocodile. I can't say drowning and being ripped to shreds alive was pleasant. But it was better than the stare of Sunce. I didn't understand. Not until I got here. To think I had such a...powerful...thing in my grasp and let it go. I had no idea what you were. The

funny part is, you don't know ether." His puppy face was twisting into a dark wolfish grin. Another creature stalked up from the expanse of whiteness. He was a lion. Not my brother, nor my father. He had a dark reddish mane, and a red-gold coat. Quickmane. I almost hadn't recognized him. For almost the entire time I'd known him, he'd had an injury I'd inflicted on his right eye. It had been pretty much gone. He'd also had a misshapen nose. But here, his face was the same as when I'd first seen it. So very long ago. He stared into me, standing beside Redband Blackrage. He opened his mouth to speak but was cut off by a massive roar. Spark charged over to us, baring his teeth and roaring again at Blackrage and Quickmane.

"Get out of here! And stay AWAY from my sister!" He snarled at them. Redband Blackrage threw him an intense glare, and then ran.

"I thought I'd been rid of your protection of her when I'd killed you." Hissed Quickmane who then turned and walked after Redband Blackrage slowly. Spark watched him go. His teeth still bared threateningly. Then he turned to me. Every trace of hostility evaporating. Again, I was amazed at what a great brother I'd had.

"Where's Starmane?" I asked curiously.

Spark looked down.

"He's uh...not here anymore..."

"What do you mean? Where is there to GO?"

Spark didn't reply, he just looked sadly at his paws. That look. That was the look lions wore when they were deciding how to word unpleasant news. Could he be dead? No! They were all READY dead.

"He couldn't have DIED your all ready dead! Spark what's going??" I cried.

He looked up.

"Look, its hard to explain. Its...uh, its weird here ok? And, its best to ignore what ever those two said." He nodded his head in the direction where Quickmane and Redband Blackrage had disappeared to.

"Ignore WHAT? He didn't TELL me anything! Spark tell me what's going on!" I Roared, not realizing how loud I had gotten until I was finished. He was looking at me like a cub that had been scolded for something it didn't do. I looked away in embarrassment.

"Sorry Spark...I'm just frustrated..." I murmured quietly.

“Frustration isn’t any reason to curl up and die sis.” He said softly. He was changing the subject. My brother was hiding something, and as much as I wanted to know what it was, I didn’t want to waste the little time I had with him arguing.

“Spark there isn’t anything left for me to live FOR. I’m useless and even if I wanted to, I couldn’t. There isn’t any water! Or Prey!”

Spark smiled warmly at me.

“There’s always something to live for.” He told me quietly, sitting beside me and nuzzling me soothingly.

“It doesn’t feel like it...” I whispered. Only now realizing how clueless and cub-like I was inside. Spark lifted his paw and turned my head to face him.

“You can’t die. You just can’t. Ok?”

I didn’t reply.

“Sis, I’m allowed to say a few things to you. Ok, sis, you have to listen. Are you listening?” He said seriously.

I nodded meekly.

“Ok, you have to find the resting place of the kings. You can wait out Dry Season there. Got that? Resting place of the kings. You HAVE to remember ok sis? When you get there, DON’T LEAVE until Dry Season’s up, if you do, well....it’ll be a harsh Dry Season, that’s all I can say.”

The white place started to fade away. I was yanked away from my brother, and his message.

My eyes flew open. I was still under the tree. I coughed. I could barely breathe under its weight. I shakily stood up and kicked the dry tree off me. I looked up at the moon. Was Spark up there, watching me? Or was the white place far, far away, and all he could do was hope I would follow his advice? I sighed. The resting place of the kings. I’d have settled for the location of some prey or water, but a cryptic phrase was good too, I thought sarcastically. As I was staring up at the moon, I wasn’t watching where I was going. My paws ran into a soft thing. I jumped back, and stared at what I’d stepped on. It was the pale cream coloured pelt of a lion. As its scent wafted into my mouth, I couldn’t believe it. It was Silentsneak!

Chapter Thirty-Three

My jaw dropped open in shock. Silentsneak. She'd been my friend back in the pride. We'd parted ways when Proudmane had taken over the pride. She'd run off when he told her she had to have cubs with him. Was she dead? I circled her. Her jaw hung open, the right side of her body was covered in a thin layer of sand. That meant she hadn't moved at all for at least a day. She looked pretty dead.

I cautiously prodded her motionless body. Her pelt was warm, either she had died recently, or she was still alive. I bent down and put my cheek to her chest. I felt unsteady, shallow breathing. So she was alive. But would be dead soon. I paced back and fourth, not knowing what to do. I wanted to help her. But HOW? It wasn't as if I knew where any water, or prey was. I took another glance at her body. Her ribs were clear and defined on her pale pelt, her skin looked like it was loosely stretched over her bones. She didn't look like she was in any condition to wake up and search for 'the resting place of the kings' with me. I sat on my tail. Most of my mind was drifting to thoughts like 'there's nothing I can do' and 'its just her time...'. I was about to walk away from her motionless body when I stopped myself. If I left her I would survive, but I would never live. How could I? Knowing I'd let my friend die in the savanna because times were hard. That wasn't me. I dug my claws into the ground. Nothing, not even these horrid conditions were going to make me abandon my friend. I walked back over to Silentsneaks body.

I took a deep breath.

"Sorry if I hurt you Silentsneak." I mumbled to her, even though I knew she couldn't hear me.

I grabbed her by the scruff of the neck. 'Here goes nothing...' I thought, then began to drag her body in the direction I'd decided to go. I grunted with the effort. Though she was thin, and relatively light, dragging her against the tall grass was wearing me out. I didn't care. I knew that dragging her would cut the time I could last without water in half. And I may not even end up saving her. But at least I was trying. Death could come and get me for all I cared.

After few hours I smelled water. Water! I hoisted Silentsneak onto my back and ran as fast as I could toward the water. I wouldn't last much longer with out it, nether would Silentsneak. When I arrived there I couldn't believe that it was actually there! For once nothing was wrong! I took long full gulps of the water. It was so good. It cooled the burning in my parched throat. I gulped down mouthful upon mouthful of the water, until I

felt like I'd explode if I had anymore. I felt strong again. Stronger than I'd felt in a long time. Strangely enough, stronger than I'd felt when I was fully fed, and had enough water in the dog pack. Freedom made all the difference I supposed.

I heard a loud roar from behind me. I spun around to see a mane standing behind me. He bared his fangs.

"LONER! How DARE you cross my territory! And have the nerve to drink out of MY water hole! Get OUT!" He bellowed, jumping down from the elevated ground that had been the water's edge in wet season. He slid in the sand and stopped right in front of me.

"I've had ENOUGH of you dirty loners drinking MY water! Contaminating it with your, your FILTH! Pride lions deserve to drink, not low lives like YOU!" He snarled. I was frozen on the spot, staring up at him. He had one scar over his mouth and a jet black mane. His pelt was a dark brown and it glimmered in the sunlight. Muscles rippled under his clean coat. This was a healthy well fed, and well muscled lion. I on the other hand, was a half starved, crippled, and weak lioness. Even at my best I could never hope to beat him in a battle, or outrun him.

He launched himself at me, sinking his teeth into my shoulder, and ripping at my flank with his claws. I shrieked in pain. He picked me up and ran at full speed, dragging me along the ground. He threw me out onto the open savanna.

"There's the border. Never cross it again." He hissed menacingly, and left. A few minutes later he reappeared, and tossed Silentsneak over as well.

"Take your dead too." He snarled.

"She's not dead!" I roared after him. But he was all ready gone. I inspected my wounds. Nothing too bad. But it stung. I flattened my ears and hissed in the direction he had disappeared into. I grabbed Silentsneak's scruff and continued walking. A strange scent reached my muzzle. Curiously, I followed it. As I walked toward it, the sparse bushes around me and the Golden grasses beneath my feet began to give way to green low growing shrubs. The plants were getting more and more plentiful. I gulped as I walked over an almost entirely green hill. Before me was a massive bunch of trees. Trees like I'd never seen. Huge trees. Their trunks as wide as several lions standing nose to tail. And they were tall. So tall...their branches stretched toward the sky. I couldn't even see the tops of some, because they were covered by the thin white clouds. I couldn't see what was between the trees. Just shadows. The trees looked like they were blocking the sun completely. Inside...it looked like it would be a world of darkness. I was suddenly afraid. I put Silentsneak down and stared at it. I didn't know if I should go in or not. I looked at the ground. I looked at Silentsneak. Poor Silentsneak...The savanna had been cruel to us both. The wounds that the Mane had given me stung when I thought about them. All that

waited for us back out there was more thirst. More hunger. More pain. What was in the Tree Place, I didn't know. But what ever it was, it had to be better than where we'd just come from.

"Don't go." I heard a quiet male voice hiss from behind me. I turned around to see an unfamiliar No-Mane looking at me through piercing purple eyes. "That is a place of the dead. They do not sleep there. They are restless. My people call it The Place Of Shadows." He said, his eyes boring into me. He had such strange colouring. He was a dark grey colour. With a pale grey mane, and an almost black muzzle. He had feathers tied to his tail with what looked like tendons from prey. His eyes were pleading.

"I beg you. Please, stay away from there."

"W-who are you?"

"I am Ghost. The keeper of memories." His voice was quiet, and high pitched. It sounded more like wind than the voice of a No-Mane.

"What's that?"

"The keeper of memories is the sacred role of holding the memories of my pride. Each keeper of memories passes them down to the new chosen one. I was only chosen two seasons ago. But I hold the wisdom of the stars in my mind. From the memories, I can tell you that the land you see before you is cursed. Too many have died there. Too many spirits are restless. No one should go into The Place Of Shadows, especially not one such as yourself."

"What? One such as myself...?"

"An open one. One who has the ability to see the dead. I can see it in your eyes, you have been opened. This place holds danger to you. You will hear the spirits."

"Y-you're scaring me." I whispered, backing away from the strange grey lion.

"You should not fear me. You should fear what lies within you. I can see it now. Yes, looking at you for this long...it is deep within you...I have never sensed one such as this..." His voice was rising in pitch. He began to walk closer and closer to me. I didn't like the look that had come over his purple gaze.

"S-stay away from me!" I snarled, the fur on my back raising.

“She has something within. Yes, she does. What is it? Where does it come from?” He was talking to himself now. His eyes weren’t focused on anything, they were far away, like his mind. He kept walking closer. My heart beat fast in my chest.

“I-I’m warning you Ghost! Get away!”

He continued coming closer.

“Come here you. Ghost needs to see what it is! Ghost has to know!” His eyes were wild and he leapt at me. I dodged, and slid backwards on the soft soil. I grabbed Silentsneak and ran.

“Come back!” He roared, chasing me. I ran faster, panicking. He was gaining on me. This wasn’t the same lion who I’d been speaking to. Something had happened to him. Something was wrong. He was getting closer and closer. There was only one place I could go, only one place I knew I could get away from him in...The Place Of Shadows.

Chapter Thirty-Four

I tore through the foliage. I didn’t stop until I tripped on a giant moss covered root. I slid painfully over plants and sharp sticks, and Silentsneak went tumbling over to the side. I got up and shook leaves and twigs out of my pelt.

I looked around. I couldn’t see the familiar sky. It had always watched over me. Been there. But now it was covered by the dark branches of these massive trees. I heard a sound from behind me. I whirled around. There was nothing there. I heard another noise, this time from above. My head shot up, but it was just a large bird taking flight. This place made me uneasy. The name of this place suited it. It was dark. None of the sun’s rays reached down here. It truly was a place of shadows. A place of darkness. I shivered.

I began walking back the way I’d come. I stopped dead. Which way had I come? This place of darkness all looked the same! I tried to pick up my own scent, and follow it. But I was lost in this sea of unfamiliarity. I wouldn’t have been able to pick out the scent of a long dead zebra in all this. It crowded my senses. The musty smell of the soil, the humid air, the trees, the scents of strange animals. It was all too strange for me to single out any one scent. I was suddenly very afraid. The shadows felt like they were closing in on me. The trees looked like giant, nasty creatures out to kill me. Every pair of bright eyes that flashed among their branches suddenly became dangerous. I couldn’t control the beat of my heart, or the speed of the thoughts that swirled around in my head like the wind in a storm. I had to get out! I ran panic, in no particular direction, forgetting all about Silentsneak. I ran through the Place Of Shadows. With every unsure step I took, I felt like the shadows were chasing me. I tripped again. Over another root. This time I went

careening face first, into a tree. Its branches shook slightly, my head felt just about ready to fall off. My eyes rolled back in my head and my face fell to the leaf covered ground.

I found myself in the white place. Again? Where was Spark? I saw no one. I patiently waited. Why was I here? I heard paw steps form behind. I turned around. There was a very large lion walking toward me. He had his head down, his skin hung loosely over his bones. He walked unevenly, with an odd limp. He had a brown pelt, with a dark brown mane. He had numerous scars all over his face. That was odd. I'd never seen anyone with scars in the white place. Quickmane's had been gone, as had mine. He stopped right in front of me. His deep honey coloured eyes looked up at me from where he held his head. He opened his scarred mouth, revealing decaying yellow teeth. His breath stank of death.

"Watch." He whispered. He had a deep, noble voice, it didn't seem to belong to the bedraggled body that held it.

"What's that supposed to-" before I could finish my sentence the white place fell away. But I didn't sink back into my body. I looked down. I still had no scars, and my paw was placed firmly on the ground, causing me no pain. But how could that be? I looked around me. I was in the Place Of Shadows. I didn't know what was going on. It smelled different. I looked closer at the trees.

"Is it just me or are they smaller...?" I wondered aloud. I felt something touch my paw. I flinched, then examined it. I stared in horror. It was blood. I tore across the jungle, following the steady stream of blood, faster than I ever could have in real life due to my leg. I found myself on a ledge. There was a body. It was a lioness. No one I knew. Her jaw hung open, her eyes still wide open, fear in them. She was still bleeding heavily from a gash in her stomach. I looked down to the lower ground and gasped. Bodies. Everywhere. They were piled on top of each other. So many bodies, and the smell. It wafted up from the pit of dead bodies, it smelled of blood, and rotting corpses. I felt breathless. How could so many have died? Why did they die!? How could I not have noticed this before!? I heard paw steps coming from behind me. A fair sized male lion approached. He was a tan colour with a dark grey mane. He was bleeding from a wound in his right shoulder but didn't seem to care.

"Oh, Mud must have missed that one. Toss 'er in." he nodded toward the body of the lioness that was at my paws. I looked at him in a daze.

"W-what?"

"Toss her in. The dead pit. Black and Stick are bringing more." He said.

"How did they all die?? What's happening!?"

“You been living under a rock for the last year?”

“I...uh...”

“You honestly don’t know?” He walked closer to me, “Where have you been? A healthy lioness like you should be out there with the rest of us in the battle!”

“W-what battle?”

He rolled his eyes.

“Where ever you’ve been, I wish I’d been there with you. Come on.” He kicked the body into the pit before dragging me down the hill. He let go and began to run, I ran too, not knowing what else there was to do. I heard the sound of hissing, and snarling coming from somewhere ahead of us. I couldn’t see because of the trees. I ran faster, and the trees thinned out, to a massive clearing.

I couldn’t believe it. There were lions, so many lions. All of them were viciously fighting each other. These were more lions than I’d ever seen. These weren’t just prides of lions, these were masses! There were as many lions here as there were birds in a flock. I took a step backwards. These lions were fighting to kill. Corpses covered the ground, all of them brutally butchered. I looked up. There was a chunk of mossy rock jutting out from a cliff near by. On it sat three big male lions. I recognized the brown one, the one who had uttered the single word ‘watch’ before I’d ended up here. He and the other two watched the battle calmly. Wordlessly. Why weren’t they fighting? How could they just watch this carnage?? I turned to the lion I’d met at the pit full of bodies.

“Who are they?”

He opened his mouth to reply but all at once the battle was gone. The lions were gone.

My eyes opened. I looked around me. I was in the same jungle. I stood up, but immediately fell. I looked down at my leg. Scarred, useless as it always had been. Had that just been a dream? It had seemed so real! I stood up, careful not to stand on my bad leg and followed the path of what I remembered led to the pit full of bodies. I stared down into it. Nothing. Just plant life. Lots of roots, some small trees. I ran down the hill. Where the battle had been. I remembered the root, I tore through the trees. I found... nothing. The tree life thinned out a bit, the trees were a bit shorter, but there was no clearing, emptied of all trees, there was no raging battle. I walked, confusedly, back to where I’d left Silentsneak. When I got there though, she was gone.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Was I in the wrong place? I panicked. Where could she have gone!? I'd only been gone for a few hours at the most. She couldn't have recovered enough to have gotten up and walked away all ready! I sniffed where I was sure I'd left her earlier. I caught the faintest bit of her scent. But in a split second it was gone, engulfed by the other, confusing scents. I sniffed again. There was something there that hadn't been there before.

It smelled like crushed leaves. Yes. It didn't smell like any of the plants near by though. I looked for tracks. There were none. I only found my own.

"Silentsneak!? Silentsneak are you here??" I called.

My voice echoed across the dark place, but I got nothing in response but an echo and the screech of a monkey. I sat down. What was I supposed to do? Lions didn't just vanish. Then again, half dead lions didn't get up and walk away without making tracks ether. I paced on the spot.

I heard the crackle of twigs as someone or something walked toward me. I froze, not daring to move. Lion scent wafted over to me. I didn't know this lion. By its scent I knew it was a lone male, there was no scent of other lions on his pelt. He also smelled of this place, which is probably why I didn't catch his scent when he was coming. I didn't dare to turn around. Lone No-Manes were more dangerous than any thing I cold imagine this place of shadows and massive trees held.

"Who are you?" I heard his voice ask, it wasn't very deep. His tone was hard, but I could hear more than a little curiosity hidden in it.

I didn't know if I should turn and answer him or not. I stayed silent, and still. I heard him take a step closer to me, I tensed.

"Hello?"

He took another step. I couldn't keep myself still any longer. I bolted. Running away as fast as I could.

"Hey! Wait!" I heard him call. I slowed down when I realized he wasn't giving chase, and hid in some thick foliage.

"Geeze you're like a frightened impala." He called. I knew he couldn't see me, or scent me because of the strong smelling plants that I was nestled in. "All right fine. Hide. I was only trying to HELP. Hmph." I heard his footsteps walking away. What would possess someone to want to live here? Cut off from the sun, the sky...By the way he'd sounded

so at ease, and how he'd asked 'who are you' as if he'd known every one in this place but me. I stood up and ruffled out my pelt.

"So, impala lioness, whatcha hiding from?" I heard a voice right in my ear. I jumped and my fur stood on end. I whirled around but saw no one.

"You deaf? Come on!" I heard it in my left ear, I saw a gold and black blur in my peripheral vision, but when I looked, there was nothing. Nothing but a few leaves that fell out of the cover of tree branches above me.

"W-who's there?"

"A spiiiiiiiit. Ha. You gotta love Ghost. The nut case. I saw him doing his whole 'crazy spirit' routine on you. HILARIOUS to watch. He doesn't usually go after anyone like that though. That was just a biiiit creepy."

The voice was from behind me now. I didn't bother turning around to look, I knew they'd be gone.

"Ah, so you've figured out I'm too fast for you eh? Well that's no fun."

A brightly coloured mass dropped from the thick leafy branches of the trees. A golden leopard landed lightly on his feet in front of me. He had an entirely black face, and the rest of his body was covered in black spots. One of his feet was pure black, and the other three white. He was grinning widely, his orange eyes were bright and playful..

"Hey there! Name's Prix. Your's?"

"Hobblestep"

"Weird name. How about I give you a new one. How 'bout Karina...no...no, you look more like a Tessa...or how about May? OR I know, you could be-"

"Look! I don't want to change my name!"

"Fine. But I'M still calling you Kylk. Or maybe I'll call youuu Tasha..." He walked around me in a circle.

"So Zena, how'd you get the scars?" He asked me. I rolled my eyes at the choice of name.

"I tried to kill a No-Mane when I was a cub."

This sent Prix into a frenzy of laughter.

I bared my teeth and snarled at him.

“Why don’t you just be quiet?”

“Well if I did that then who would you talk to Mirina?” He grinned, “The spiiirits? Oh, oh, better yet, go find Ghost! Have a little chat with him, sometimes he thinks he IS a spirit. Oh man, he gets all like, hazy eyed, and goes on about nothing! Oh man I LOVE that guy! So what brings you to the jungle? Well, I mean apart from Ghost and his creepiness.”

“The...what?”

“Juuungle. This place is a little stretch of jungle stuck in the middle of the savanna. Its really weird. Its like two totally different worlds.”

“Uh...I don’t know. I was just wandering...I guess I got here by accident...”

“Accident. Psh. Accidents don’t exist. There’s fate, and there’s decisions. That’s it. No mistakes. And you seemed like you were gonna come in weather Ghost chased you or not. Seems you’re not too great at navigating around here though.”

“Wait...you saw me come in? You’ve been FOLLOWING me the whole time.”

“Sure have.”

“ARGH! Why?”

“I follow around all new comers. Though, you’re the first lion since Thunder. Lions think this place is cursed. They’re all just like Ghost.”

“Who’s Thunder?”

“The one who called you an impala. He got here when he was just a cub. Hey what was with the whole, carrying around a dead body thing when you first came?”

“That wasn’t a BODY. That was Silentsneak. She was alive...hey, if you’ve been watching us this whole time shouldn’t YOU know where she’s gone?” I narrowed my eyes at him.

“I’ve been following YOU. Not staring at a dead body.”

“She ISN’T DEAD!”

“All right, the MOSTLY dead body.”

“You’ll be mostly dead if you don’t get away from me!”

“You’d have to catch me first.” He grinned mischievously and jumped into the thick branches of the tree.

As if I’d chase him. What was I a cub after a butterfly? Prix could go annoy Ghost. I stalked off.

An upside down black face popped down in front of me from the branches.

“Where ya goin?” He said, then popped his head back into the braches.

I glared up into the tree.

“Away.”

I began walking again. Something tapped me on the shoulder. I turned around and there was nothing there.

“PRIX!” I roared.

He lowered his head.

“Yesss?”

“Leave me alone!”

“Not a chance.”

I swiped my paw up at him, but he was too quick, and retreated into the branches again. He stuck his head down a few paw steps away.

“I’m over heeeere.” He called, then receded yet again into the branches.

I ran over to the spot, but his head kept popping out where ever I wasn’t. I followed the quivering branches that marked the leopard path, and tried to swipe up through the branches at him. I was surprised to find that with out even knowing it I was laughing after a while. Smiling and chasing after him. I was giggling like a cub. I jumped to try to knock him out of the tree. My head hit a low branch and I fell painfully to the ground.

I lifted my head. The world seemed to be spinning. I shook it off and stood up. I looked up. The quivering of the branches had stopped.

“Prix?” I asked. I got no reply. “Prix you there?” No response. I stood very still. Listening for any sounds. There was nothing. Where had Prix gone? I looked around. There was no sign of him. I heard a voice coming from not very far away. I walked toward the sound of all the voices. I gasped. There were many, many lions crowded around something. They were all murmuring excitedly, and worriedly to each other. Prix had said there were only two lions he’d ever seen come into the jungle. How could he have missed THIS MANY. There must have been at least 50, probably more. All of them fell silent, one voice cut across the thick jungle.

“Today, we say the war is over. The last bodies shall be placed in the pit. The ones that should have been placed there long ago, INSTEAD of the hundreds that lay there now. May the gods forgive us...” Six lions walked up to the rim of the deep pit I’d seen bodies in, they dropped three bodies in. I wasn’t close enough to see what they looked like. A cheer rose from the massive crowd and the lion who had spoken first silenced them with a nod.

“The old ways are dead. We must never let anything like this happen again. First ,this place, this jungle, it may be a place of plenty, a place of wonders, but it is also a place of death. And darkness. No lion shall set foot in this place again! It shall be called the Place Of Shadows. Second, We must split off into smaller groups. Then no lion will ever have too much power, and no tragedy such as this one will ever occur again... In celebration of this proud new way of life, we shall call ourselves prides. May we never forget who we are.”

Another cheer rose up and the lions called in eerie sink to each other.

“PRIDES! PRIDES! PRIDES!”

Proud NEW way of living? Lions had lived in prides since the beginning of time! What was this place!? As the lions began to clear out, choosing groups to live in, I pushed my way to the front. I stared down into the pit. Full of dead bodies. The least decayed ones, the ones on top, that I assumed where what had just been thrown in were three lions. The brown one I’d seen in my dream, and two others. One was a pure white, though his pelt was stained with blood, colouring it a bright red. He had been brutally murdered. And the last one was a much younger golden lion with a mane of red, orange and yellow twisted together. Suddenly everything began to fade. It faded to white.

I was in the white place. There was no waiting for someone to come this time. The brown lion was there. Golden eyes probing me.

I saw another lion approaching. It was the white one I'd seen in the pit. Though he seemed very much alive now. Every bit of him down to his claws was white. His eyes were a pinkish red and everything they looked at they seemed to look THROUGH. I made me uncomfortable. Yet another lion approached. The last one from the pit. But in he looked completely different in life than in death. He was gorgeous. His bright multi shaded and coloured mane was massive, and it framed his thin face. Endless colours of yellows, reds and oranges all perfectly entwined with one another. He had brilliant blue eyes that stood out blue against his orangeish pelt. Even the way he moved was graceful. Each step flowed into the next like honey flowing down the trunk of a tree. He stopped in a line between the other two. He was like a shining star between two gnarled trees.

“Who are you all?”

The brow one spoke.

“We are the ancient kings. What I have shown you is the past.”

Suddenly I understood. Their bodies in the pit, putting them to rest. Putting the kings to rest here! I was exactly where I needed to be! This place, this jungle, it was the resting place of the kings!

Chapter Thirty-Six

There was silence. I wasn't quite sure what to say, so I stood there with my mouth half open. The magnificent one in the middle spoke. His mouth curved into a smile that fit perfectly into the anatomy of his face.

“I'm Lite,” he indicated toward the albino, who's eyes were still trained on me expressionlessly, “That's Centurion,” He nodded toward the brown one, and wrinkled his nose, “And that's Stagnos.” He said the name with contempt.

Stagnos bared his yellow teeth and twisted his face into a snarl, the loose skin on his face folding over itself, he let out a low, menacing growl.

“Do not speak my name, you hyena-faced fool!” Stagnos' booming voice surprised me again, his voice rang with authority, deep and noble. I had no trouble believing that he had been a king, and a good one at that, in his prime.

Lite just shifted his mane and smiled the way you'd smile at a small cub to the older lion.

Stagnos roared, and the only reaction he got out of Lite was a smile of pity. He stood up and walked over to me, his eyes shifting over me like he was looking at a piece of prey.

“May I ask the beautiful lioness’s name?” He asked, his voice smooth as honey, just like his movements.

My breath caught in my throat, as I was spoken to by such a beautiful creature. This was the only lion I’d ever seen who was more handsome than Golden.

“H-Hobblestep...?” I realized after I said it that it came out as a question rather than an answer.

Another smile crossed Lite’s narrow muzzle. He stood very close to me, nose to nose. My legs felt like jelly. He poked me lightly with his snout and to my own surprise I fell into a sitting position. He sat down gracefully beside me.

“I can see why all the manes are crazy for you Hobblestep. Even with the scars you were sort of cute. But without them you’re like the image of Sunce herself.”

Lit exchanged a meaningful glance with Centurian. I was confused.

Sunce? I’d heard Duskflame talking about Sunce. She was the goddess of the sun in wild dog mythology. Why was this lion talking about it?

Stagnos growled lowly at Lite.

“Do not play your games with her Lite.” He hissed.

“Games? ME? Never!” Lite laughed sarcastically, “Besides, all I was doing was complimenting the beautiful Hobblestep. Is that so wrong?”

“I’m warning you...”

“Or what? You’ll cause a war and kill us all? Wait...oh that’s right...you all ready DID that.” Growled Lite, flicking his left ear as an invitation to fight.

Stagnos roared and leapt onto Lite, though much older, Stagnos was also much larger than Lite, and pinned him easily. His claws were unsheathed, and resting on his throat.

“Go ahead, TRY to kill me. Can’t tell you how much I wish it would work. But you and I both know we’re stuck here.” Hissed Lite, shoving Stagnos off and walking away. As he passed by me he said,

“We’ll talk later. Maybe when HE’S not around.” He glared at Stagnos, who glared back, and headed into the never ceasing whiteness.

I watched him walk off.

“Hmph.” I heard the tiny sound from behind me. Centurion was there. A tiny amused smile on his very wide face. His wide set eyes though, were serious.

“They never could get along.” He commented. He had a wispy voice, slightly high-pitched, and very soft. It reminded me of Ghost’s.

“Don’t you start Centurion...” Snarled Stagnos, stalking over to us, his odd limp hitting me again. Why was he still injured here? He sat down with a grunt.

“She wants to know why you sent her the vision of the war. She wants to know what any of this has to do with her. She wants to know why you and Lite are always angry at each other. Are you going to tell her any of this, or shall we wait, and let Lite tell it to her, with his spin on it?”

I stared at Centurion. Had those just been lucky guesses at what I was thinking, or were those pink eyes capable of seeing more than the eyes of other lions?

Stagnos heaved a sigh and stared at the ground, looking frustrated.

“I see.” Said Centurion, seeming to have perked right up after Lite had left. He came and sat down beside me, his pink eyes friendly, massive, but not very well shaped mane shifting slightly as he walked on the smooth surface of the white place.

“Did you know you’ve met one of my relatives?” he asked lightly.

“Your relatives?”

“Ghost.”

I couldn’t help but smile.

“You remind me of him.”

Centurion half smiled.

“You think he’s mad don’t you?”

I felt the blood rush to my face, and my ears flatten against my head in embarrassment. I hadn’t even been THINKING of that part of meeting Ghost, but Centurion seemed to know anyway.

“I can assure he is not. Keepers Of Memories are sometimes...erratic in their behavior. Especially Ghost. He is one of the youngest Keepers Of Memories ever named.”

I'd thought Ghost had just made the 'keeper of memories' up. I gulped. Centurion continued,

“The reason he attacked you was because it is very rare of a Keeper Of Memories to encounter something that they know nothing about, something unique. Even all the memories of his pride and those who have ever been in it are not enough. There have only ever been one or two like you. You-”

“Thank you Centurion. That's ENOUGH.” Roared Stagnos, from behind us, and stepped between us, “You have told her enough. It was a mistake to bring you and Lite. Let us return her to the waking world, she's been here for too long anyway.”

Centurion nodded slowly at Stagnos' orders and the two of them stood and trotted away. The white place began to fade, and my eyes slid shut.

In seconds they were open again, but to a face. It was pure black.

“Suzy?”

I smiled weakly.

“That's not my name Prix.”

Prix grinned.

“Aww sweet your alive! Geeze, you scared me there Qwen. You hit a tree branch when you were jumping, fell pretty hard, didn't get up.”

If felt an odd sense of joy that Prix hadn't been part of the past. At least I knew SOMENE in this jungle I wasn't allowed to leave.

Prix looked behind him still grinning ear to ear.

“I TOLD you she'd be all right! TOLD you Arnos!”

I sat up slowly and looked around to see a pure black leopard standing a few feet away. He had very dark green eyes that didn't contrast his pelt and were almost hidden in the shadows. He had massive jet black paws, but not a very large body to fit them. He looked at me then Prix.

“It doesn’t make sense. She should have a concussion according to all the signs...” He said curiously, his voice was quiet and wise, even though he looked no older than Prix.

“What ever dude. So long as Talari here is all right, its fine with me,” His smile grew wider, “Come on Sasha! Lets get you some food.”

Even though the name changed every time, I knew Prix was still addressing me, and I bounded after the black-faced leopard, deeper into the foreboding jungle that was his home.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

I picked over the leaves and roots scattered over the soft ground of the jungle. We’d stopped to get some strange warthog like creature that was common prey in the jungle. It had tasted gamy, and somehow summed up the over all feeling of the shadow filled jungle in its bitter flavor. Prix had told me I could take shelter with him, even though leopards weren’t supposed to take on ‘house guests’, especially lion ones.

Lions were hated with a passion in this jungle. The memory of the massive battle I had witnessed had lived on in them. It had ravaged the land, and tainted the very existence of the jungle. The presence of the pain and suffering still lived in the air, even though it happened too long ago for any living lion or any other creature to remember.

Prix had told me all this, and added to the end that he didn’t care. At all.

Arnos had come with us. He was one of Prix’s friends. He didn’t speak very often. Quiet by nature, he would walk along side us. Big paws hitting the moist earth soundlessly. Sometimes you couldn’t even see him coming. His pure black pelt blended perfectly into the shadows, and his dark eyes looked like shadowed foliage when he stood in the cover of the trees. He could become quite literally invisible; it suited his personality that he could just melt into the forest. I envied him sometimes when he’d just disappear, but I knew was still walking with us. If only I could have done that in the savannah. Blend into the grasses and just disappear...

Prix stopped walking, knocking me back to reality and I skidded myself to a halt, trying not to run into him.

“What is it Prix?”

Prix turned to me, grinning from ear to ear again.

“Home.”

I looked over at the moss covered tree we stood at the base of. It was a dark brown, almost black on the bark. Bright green moss covered the bottom of the tree, so that you couldn't even see through it enough to catch the true colour of the rough bark. It thinned out as it went farther up the tree, but thin spindly vines twisted their way up the entire trunk and entwined themselves around the branches. They were so small, but went up further than my eyes could even see.

"Home?" I asked quizzically, circling the tree, looking for an entrance. Perhaps he lived like the dogs? I found nothing. "Where's the entrance?"

Prix laughed, until he was out of breath. Arnos let a small smile creep across his face. Stupid leopards. What were they laughing at?

"Whew! This is why I love you Tina." He paused to get the last bit of laughter out of him, "you don't go IN. You go UP."

"WHAT?! I don't go UP trees! In case the tan pelt and no spots didn't tip you off, I'm not a leopard!" I hissed at him.

"Aww is the lil lion afraid of climbing the big bad tree?" Prix said jokingly. Memories of the way Stealthspeed and the others back in my pride had taunted me about the baobab tree. A deep cut sadness and rage burned through me.

"Look, I don't NEED you Prix. I can take care of myself. I don't know why I even agreed to come with you. You're nothing but a dirty leopard!" I roared in an impulsive outburst.

Prix shrank backwards.

"Random temper tantrums much?" He asked meekly.

I snarled at him and unsheathed my claws. Suddenly fear filled his face. Arnos' face lit up with surprise and fear as well in the background.

"Look, I didn't mean anything by it you can-"

"I don't CARE what you meant." Rage was flooding over me. Just random, rage. I knew in my mind that I shouldn't be upset with Prix, after all, he hadn't done anything. But anger at everything was in me. Prix's words had set off something that had always been inside me. I didn't have control over myself anymore. I suddenly panicked. The last time I'd felt this was in the battle with the dogs. The screams of the dogs that had died by my paws flashed briefly before my eyes. I had to get as far away from Prix as I could, I didn't want to hurt him!

I managed to turn my body around and run the way I'd come.

"Stella wait up!" He called, but didn't give chase.

I ran through the jungle, letting the anger slowly seep out of me. I took in gulps of the pure fresh air. It smelled like the trees, and the musty scent of earth that had once scared me was strangely soothing. I lay down under the wide branches of a tree that didn't grow out in the savannah. I drifted to sleep. But instead of having some actual rest, I was back in the white place again. I wanted to snarl at the kings. Why couldn't they leave me alone? I didn't care about their wars, or petty disputes among themselves! I heard foot steps from behind me, and was ready to snap at who ever it may be. I spun around the face them, but my annoyed hiss died in my throat. This wasn't a king.

"Spark!" I cried instead, nuzzling him affectionately in the mane. He nuzzled me back, smiling.

"Hey sis. Sorry I haven't been visiting you. The sprits in this jungle have been making it hard..."

"You mean the kings?"

His blue eyes turned hard.

"They have come to you?" He hissed.

I nodded, his expression was very serious and dark.

"Spark what's wrong?"

"THEY are what's wrong Hobblestep."

I looked at him quizzically. Spark sighed.

"They may tell you things...things that you are not meant to know."

"Spark why can't I know?? What is this big...big SECRET? Why did they show me the past? Where did father go??"

"Starmane is dead."

This peaked my interest.

“You’re dead too Spark...”

“No, he’s truly dead. No part of him is left, not even his spirit.”

I gasped in horror.

“WHAT?”

Spark looked away.

“What your happy-go-lucky friend here is trying to say is that him and you together caused the death of his soul. Just like you two made him fight rather than run when he was against an opponent he couldn’t beat when you were cubs. You two’ve killed him twice now.” It was Lite’s voice that said the cruel words which made Spark visibly flinch, and sink his head lower.

“What?”

Lite stalked gracefully toward us.

“The penalty for ‘opening’ someone is the removal of memories from one’s spirit and sending what’s left back into the land of the living. It may sound like they live on, but they are dead. In the truest and simplest form, there is absolutely nothing left of them.”

“To speak one’s name is to make them live again.” Growled Spark, raising his head and glaring at Lite, “My father will never die. Not so long as his memory lives on.”

“He’ll be forgotten. Its inevitable. I mean, *I* was forgotten, and who thought anyone could forget someone like me? Its unthinkable but it happened.”

“Why are you here Lite?”

“To visit your charming sister. Why else?”

“Don’t you touch her.”

The way their gazes locked made me suspect they were talking about something more than just me. There was something else going on here, and I was in the dark about what it was.

“What’s going on?”

They both looked over at me silently at the same time.

“Tell me!”

Nether spoke. A thought hit me.

“If you won’t tell me Ghost will.”

I could tell by the way Lite’s mask of apathy melted away for just a split second that Ghost knew. He was probably an opened one too, and had gotten answers from Centurion, his ancestor. I let a smirk slide across my face.

“Tell me now or I’ll ask Ghost!”

“Hobbs, you don’t understand! You’re not READY!” Cried Spark. Frustration built inside me.

“Good bye.” I forced my eyes open, back into the waking world. I felt smug that I’d finally had power over those dreams in the white place. Tiredness forgotten, I followed the scent of the savannah that seeped in through the trees. Ghost had been right at the border of the jungle last I’d seen. If I found him I’d have my answers. About everything. About the ancient war, about what Spark was keeping from me...everything.

“Ghost?” I called as I neared the treeline. I got no response.

“Ghost??” I called louder. This time I heard a shuffling of paws in the bushes. I watched the quivering plant intently. But what stepped out was not the strange grey lion. It was a hyena.

It was a well built creature. Low to the ground. It had short muscular legs. Its pelt was a pale tan colour for the most part. It had dark brown spots from head to toe. Its legs were a darker brown than its pelt, and it had a black zebra-like tail. Its ears were a similar shape to mine, but they were larger, and didn’t seem to fit very well on its long snout and broad muzzle. Compared to the wild dogs I’d spent so much time with, this creature was ugly.

It cackled and three others like it stalked out of the bushes.

“Ahaha...lone, lone lioness? Why you in big tree place alone? You not know it’s dangerous? Specially with lone lioness’s leg...” The lead hyena was a female. Her voice was rough and her words were disconnected, not flowing smoothly into each other. She didn’t sound as if she spoke very often. A cruel grin was glued on her face.

“Poor, poor lone lioness. You no live long. Me and me boys put lone lioness out of misery.” She cackled again and the three males behind her cackled too, inching toward me, with their stumpy tails wagging. There was no way out.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

The hyenas stank of long dead kill. They were grinning their canine grins, and I could see chunks of rotting meat hanging loosely between their decaying yellow teeth. I could see bits of dried blood chipping off of each of their black muzzles. The lead female had a strange frill of fur from the top of her head to between her shoulders. Her males both had it too, but theirs were smaller, and not as prominent.

“Last words, have you to say?” She asked darkly, still circling my position.

The way she and her males were circling me reminded me of the serpentine slither that the crocodiles had taken on when I’d saved Feather from their snapping jaws. But when I looked into the eyes of these hyenas, I did not see the same blind instinct to kill. Theirs was more deliberate. More...forced. Why would they want to kill me anyway? Dry season was harsh outside the jungle, and it was against logic to use energy killing me when they could be hunting or finding water...

Suddenly I heard heavy paws hitting the earth. Both me and the hyenas looked over to see what was coming. I squinted at the reddish golden shape that was running toward us. I could see a red-brown mane flowing in the wind. As it got close enough for me to see it’s facial features, my jaw dropped open, as I recognized the white blaze going up his snout and between his eyes.

It was Feather. The lion I had raised. The lion I had been separated from with out notice when the dogs had taken me prisoner. Subconsciously my eyes started to water. I hadn’t realized what an overwhelming love I’d had for Feather. I wanted to jump for joy that he was coming back to me, but I also wanted to scream. He was coming into danger’s way for me. He stopped in front of me. Facing the hyenas. Broad muzzle held high.

“You so much as SNIFF her and I’ll kill you.” He growled, he unsheathed his thick black claws. They glinted in the sun light, their size and sharpness putting the hyena’s blunt, dusty claws to shame.

I couldn’t believe this proud lion that stood before me was Feather. MY Feather. He looked very much like his brother, Golden, the broadness of his face and muzzle, the way his jaw was set, the rounded shape of his blue-green eyes. But his colouring was all too similar to his father. Quickmane. Who had murdered my own father, Starmane.

The hyena's passed each other a glance, flicking horse-like tails as they did. Feather's eyes didn't leave them for a second.

"Back down red lion. Red lion knows not what he walks into." Snarled the lead female. Feather held his ground, long tail lashing.

The female nodded and without a sound, without a movement, a cue of any sort, the hyenas jumped onto Feather simultaneously. Before he could make any sort of move to protect himself, the four hyenas had him pinned to the ground and were ripping away viciously at his flesh. I shrieked louder than I ever could have mustered for my own safety. But they were hurting FEATHER.

Without thinking I leapt onto one of the hyenas who was attacking Feather. I dug my claws into its pelt, and dragged them downward toward me. The same way my father had to his murderer in his final battle. The hyena yipped in pain, and I dragged it off my adoptive son. It tore itself out of my grasp, and flipped onto its feet. Its wide muscular chest was full of rock hard muscles and it launched itself at me. At my neck.

If there is one thing your mother teaches you as a cub, it is once you are in a hyena's grasp, there is no getting out of it. Even if you're a cripple you know that their powerful jaws around your neck is a death sentence. One of the most humiliating, but inescapable deaths a lion could have. Was this to be my fate? I had come close to death many times before, maybe that was why I felt perfectly at peace.

Outside my mind I was gagging for air. My paws were flailing in all directions, frantically trying to get the hyena off of me. I could feel my body convulsing like a zebra in a death bite, the rotting teeth sinking deeper and deeper into my jugular, I was aware of all this, but strangely apathetic.

In my mind it was perfectly quiet and calm. As serene as a water hole on a windless day. In my mind's eye I could see water. Raining down from the heavens. As if by magic. I could feel it sinking into my fur, and wetting my skin. The soft, cool, miracle substance was all over me. I'd imagine that was what wet season was like. I'd only ever seen one wet season, I'd been young when it had happened. It reminded me of how short my life had really been. I'd been alive just long enough to know what I wanted out of life – to be with Golden - and know if I died now that I'd never get it.

Suddenly a clap of thunder startled me out of my peaceful half conscious state. This wasn't part of the images in my head. My eyes flickered back to the fading thing that was reality, the hyena's jaws were still on my neck, and my eyelids were sliding shut. The thunder came again, but this time much closer. The second time it happened, I realized this wasn't thunder at all. It was the loud, thunder-LIKE roar of a lion.

This time I felt the hyena's grip let my neck free, and my head fell to the ground painfully. I took in gasp upon gasp of the sweet jungle air. I didn't think my lungs would ever be full.

"The Thunder cat is here!" barked the female, "Kill The One, and we must leave!"

Through my blurred vision I saw the hyena who had been biting my neck leaning down to finish what it had started, when a golden brown paw shot out of no where and whacked the side of its head. Blood flew out of the side of its mouth and it came crashing to the ground beside me.

"Get OUT of my jungle! All of you! You KNOW what happens to trespassers!" Roared a voice. I vaguely recognized it. It was the lion who had called me a frightened impala earlier. Prix had said his name was Thunder. I could tell why.

The hyena's whimpered and ran off. I could only hear three pairs of paws running. The fourth still lay beside my head, his body motionless, a steady stream of blood trickling from his mouth.

I flinched as I felt blood seep onto my fur. I screamed when I realized it did not belong to me, nor the hyena beside me. That meant it had to be Feather's. I leapt to my feet. I could feel blood dripping out of the wound on my neck but I didn't care. I needed to check if Feather was ok.

He was far, FAR, from ok. He had bloody bite marks covering his reddish golden pelt. His tail was twisted in an unnatural way. His jaw was limp and hung in front of his face, stuck in a snarling position. I could see his mane was wet from hyena's jaws trying to find their way to his neck, but his mane was too thick and they only succeeded in getting their saliva all over him. One of his ears was torn badly, and he had a wound on his belly that was bleeding heavily.

I shrieked again. This couldn't be happening. Was he dead? He looked dead, but I was afraid to check. I didn't want to find out that he really was dead. My breaths came in broken gasps. The lion with a roar like thunder stepped up beside me, I didn't bother to look up at his face.

"Calm down there. You've lost a lot of blood. You-"

"Calm down? CALM DOWN!?! NO! No, I WON'T calm down! How about I sit here and FEAR FOR MY FRIENDS LIFE! How about I DON'T calm down. How would YOU feel if YOUR friend was here! LOOK AT HIM! HE'S BLEEDING! OH GREAT SAVANNAH HE'S DEAD ISN'T HE?! No! What will I do? No! I-"

My words were cut short by the heavy weight of the lion's dark paw colliding into the side of my head. I fell to the ground in a daze and fainted.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

For the next few days I slipped in and out of consciousness at random. Every time my eyes slid open something was different. Different scents, different scenery. Once I awoke to pure blue eyes staring down at me. I couldn't see the rest of the face. Just the haunting image of the blue eyes, which were missing their pupils. I heard muffled voices,

"There's nothing more I can do for her, I don't expect her to survive."
An old female voice was saying.

"No! There MUST be something you can do for her!" exclaimed the lion called Thunder. As the eerie blue eyes moved I caught a glimpse of a dark coloured lion leaning over me, amber eyes full of heartfelt concern.

Another day I awoke to hear the Thunder roaring,

"WHO told you to kill her? WHO?"

And the broken distorted reply that had to come from a hyena,

"The Ghost cat. They did, they did! They says we can come in Big Tree place with no danger if we kill Cripple cat! Not Rock's fault, not Rock's fault. Don't hurt Rock..."
Rock, must have been the hyena's name. Many of them spoke in third person.

Ghost? Had Ghost sent these killers after me? But why would he do that? Before I could ponder it any further, my eyelids slid closed.

The experiences blurred together in a half dream half reality jumble. I had trouble separating which was which.

One morning I woke up, and didn't find my eyelids immediately sliding back into their closed position. I blinked away the wetness that was clouding my vision. This place was different. The air smelled fresher, cleaner, than the other part of the jungle. Here, I could see bits of pure blue sky in the gaps between the thick branches and wide leaves of the jungle trees. I unsteadily rolled onto my belly and shakily tried to get up. My head ached as it got further from the ground. I clenched my jaw and kept raising myself up. Eventually I was able to stand, but my head was spinning, probably from lying down so long. How long had I been unconscious? The memories of what had happened slowly

trickled back into my memory. Where had Thunder gone? Where had Feather gone? Surely I hadn't just been left in the middle of the jungle. The pain in my head was ebbing slowly.

I took a step forward.

"Ow!" I heard a high pitched voice yelp.

I took a step back and saw a rather small leopard who had been asleep in the shade. It had been almost impossible to spot her. Her spots were the same shape as the shadows of leaves, and her pelt blended nicely into the ground.

She hopped to her feet, her black tipped tail waving in the air excitedly. Her golden and black pelt was messy and disheveled. She wasn't beautiful, but had a unique and endearing sort of look to her tomboyish appearance. The fur on her head stuck up in all directions, and she had round blue eyes. She looked like she was younger than me. By at least 5 months. Not a cub anymore, but by no means an adult.

"Y-you're awake! You're, you're...standing...?" She ended her statement in a question and immediately began to sniff me from head to toe, probing me with her cold pink nose.

"Hey! Watch it! What are you trying to do?" I hissed, pulling myself away from the young leopard. She recoiled away.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to offend you. I was only trying to figure out how you're able to stand. I've never heard of anyone able to walk around, and stand with out help like you are after that kind of injury."

"How does poking me help you figure that out?" I growled at her. I was in no mood to be poked and prodded.

She looked at me strangely.

"Because I'm an apprentice Healer. We can tell stuff like that..." she trailed off, as if I should know the rest. I'd never heard of a Healer. I knew the word heal, you're wounds would do it to themselves, but someone who did it FOR you? That was unheard of.

I looked at her oddly, and she looked back at me. We had one of those awkward moments where you have no idea what to say, so you wait for the other one to say something, but they are in the exact same situation...

"How long was I out?" I asked.

“About four days. Though you weren’t unconscious the whole time. Just a lot of it. Sometimes you would open your eyes, but you wouldn’t say anything. I thought you were going to turn out to be a mute. Thunder said that you were screaming your head off when the red lion was bleeding though. He said he liked you better when you weren’t awake and-”

“The red lion. Feather. Where is he?” I cut her off. I didn’t give an impala’s antler as to what the o-so-mighty-Thunder thought of me.

“So his name is Feather...” The leopard noted, “He’s being looked after by Starya, she said he really shouldn’t be disturbed right now.”

“Starya being who?”

“The Head Healer. I’m training to be another one, oh, I’m Gemma by the way.”

“I’m Hobblestep. Anything else happen while I was out?”

“Yea, two cheetahs tried to come in. Thunder chased them out though.”

Dapple and Chase.

“Why?”

Gemma paused. Her sapphire blue eyes stared blankly into the moss on a tree for a while then turned back to me.

“Not sure. It’s odd you know, lions are supposed to be group animals, but I’m more social than him. ‘Course, he’s still like a big brother to me, he’s just a push over once you get to know him.” She looked like she was about to go on, but abruptly her head shot up and she glared up into the branches of the tree above us.

Just then a gold and black shape plopped out of the tree. I recognized him right away.

“Eka! Oh, thank Oblak you’re alive!!” Exclaimed Prix, running over to me excitedly, “I will NEVER make you even go NEAR a tree again!”

I looked down, embarrassed that I’d snapped at him before and run off like a cub having a temper tantrum.

“Come on, I found an awesome place for you to make your den where you won’t have to climb trees-”

“Wait just one minute!” Hissed Gemma. Her high-pitched voice trying to sound authoritative wasn’t working, and Prix looked at her as if she was a child, his bright eyes amused.

“Don’t look at me like that Prix! I’m serious! She has to rest, and stay here, under a HEALER’S CARE.”

“Actually I’ve had worse with out a...Healer...”

Gemma stared at me.

“You’ve survived WORSE without a Healer?” She repeated in wonder.

All eyes were on me and my face felt hot, Gemma was looking at me as if I was some sort of freak of nature.

“Hobbelstep! I can’t believe it! Hobblestep!!” I heard a voice call. I turned, the pale cream pelt and dark contrasting eyes of a lioness I knew well stood before me.

“Silentsneak! Silentsneak what are you doing here!?” I cried, running over to her, and giving her a friendly nuzzle on the cheek.

“That’s a good question.” Silentsneak laughed, “I have no idea how I got here. Starya found me unconscious under a tree and brought me here to help.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. Let out a long and happy laugh. Starya was a leopard, she probably carried her up a tree, and that’s why I hadn’t found footprints. It all made sense!

“I know how you got here...” I proceeded to tell her about how I’d found her almost dead in the savannah, and had dragged her to the jungle. She listened, dark eyes very wide. Silentsneak and I began to catch up, telling each other what had happened after we’d left the pride, but Gemma broke it up.

“Everyone must clear out!” She declared, blue eyes hard, “She has to rest. If you excite her, she’ll not be able to sleep, and won’t heal as quickly. So everyone please leave us.”

Silentsneak frowned but then nodded.

“See you later Hobbs.”

“Bye...”

Prix walked over, he'd been sitting in the shadow of a big tree, looking bored the whole time.

"Well that was thoroughly uninteresting, but your friend's fun to look at," There was a hint of mischief in his orange eyes, "See you tomorrow, and maybe I'll see HER sooner." He threw me a sharp-toothed grin and shot himself into a tree.

Gemma rolled her eyes.

"You need to sleep. I shouldn't have let you talk to them as long as I did. Starya will be mad..." Gemma frowned.

I lay down obediently and fell asleep.

Chapter Forty

I awoke to a quiet thud and the smell of impala in front of my nose. I opened my eyes slowly and saw that a fresh impala carcass was sitting not even a claw away. My eyes widened in surprise. I hadn't had fresh impala since...well since I was in the pride I suppose. I'd stolen from hyenas when I'd been a loner, and when I was with the wild dogs I usually ate last, and usually only the toughest and least flavorful pieces of meat left on it.

"Eat it." I heard a voice tell me.

I looked up.

Before me was a golden lion. He was looking down at me impatiently. The front of his mane was a bright yellow-orange colour, that faded into a dark brown, almost black shade by the end. He had a scar over his jaw that was very noticeable on his otherwise plain face. I would have thought I'd never met him, but I recognized his eyes. The amber eyes I'd seen in one of the feverish times I'd awoken. They'd been so concerned and heart felt then, but now they were annoyed.

"Hello?" He hissed, "are you going to eat it or not?"

"The whole thing?"

He rolled his eyes.

"No, you can only eat the hooves. OF COURSE THE WHOLE THING!"

My face twisted into a scowl. Jerk.

“Well SORRY! All I did was ask! Am I supposed to psychically know I’m allowed to eat a whole impala in dry season?!”

“Is that any way to talk to your valiant savior?” He asked, changing his voice to sound majestic as he said ‘valiant savior’. I narrowed my eyes.

“Valiant savior?? You hit me in the head and knocked me out!”

“You’re alive aren’t you?”

“That’s not the POINT!! You’re not supposed to...” He was walking away. WALKING AWAY. I was in MID SENTENCE! “Hey!” I called, but he kept walking. I ran after him.

“Hey! I was talking!”

“Which is why I left.”

“Well you’ve got about as much manors as an angry hippo!”

He stopped walking and turned around to face me.

“So I have no manners now because I don’t want to hear you babble on about nothing?”

“I wasn’t BABBLING! I was-”

“You’re doing it again.” He started walking again.

“Where are you going?” I hissed, wondering what was so important that he felt the need to walk away ever time I tried to construct a sentence.

“To take a nap.”

“A nap?” I was unimpressed.

“A nap. I was up all night getting that impala.”

“It took you the WHOLE night to catch an impala?”

“For one thing, it’s dry season, for another thing it’s a four hour walk to the open savannah. You probably didn’t notice the walk on the way here seeing as I dragged both you and your friend here.”

I opened my mouth then closed it. Four hours? FOUR HOURS?

“And I went there yesterday because I thought you might like some food from your home land.” He continued. When I still stayed silent he stopped and looked me in the eye, “The word that should be coming to your mind right about now is...valiant.” He whispered spitefully, then charged off in a run.

I glared at him as he went. SO he'd done something nice. He was still a jerk.

I walked back to my impala and munched hungrily into it. It really was delicious. It was laced with fat, unlike the lean meat I'd been eating. This impala had been well fed, it must have lived on the outskirts of the jungle, and feasted on all the plant life from it. I licked the blood off my chops and stood up. I shook the dried leaves and twigs out of my pelt. I still hadn't finished the impala, even though to most lions, one was a mere snack, I'd lived on so little for so long that my stomach couldn't hold as much. I decided I'd invite Silentsneak over to finish it off with me. She would appreciate some impala.

I walked a little ways into the jungle until I found Gemma. She was sitting talking to a very old leopard, a serious expression on her young face.

“Gemma?”

Both the leopards turned around. I flinched backwards when the old lion's pure blue pupil-less eyes stared straight at me. The fur on her muzzle was a faded grey colour. Her spots were oddly shaped, less perfectly formed than the other leopards I'd seen, they seemed to flow into each other more.

“What do you need of my apprentice Hobblestep?” Asked the old leopard, her seemingly blind eyes directed straight at me.

“How do you know my name...? And who I am?”

“There are other ways of seeing than with your eyes, Hobblestep.” She hissed.

I was perplexed by her response, but didn't think much of it.

“I told her your name, and she can...sense things I guess. This is Starya, the Head Healer, and my teacher.” Gemma looked embarrassed of the quick response Starya had given me, “What did you need?”

“I was looking for Silentsneak, do you know where she is?”

Gemma looked at me blankly.

“Who?”

“Silentsneak. You know, pale lioness, brown eyes. You found her in the jungle unconscious.”

Gemma glanced nervously at Starya.

“Is she who you were talking to yesterday?” Asked Starya, her voice cracked with age.

“Yes, that’s her.” I wondered again, how she knew that I’d been speaking to Silentsneak. I guess Gemma must have told her that too. Gemma gave another nervous glance at Starya, who stayed perfectly calm.

Why were they so nervous?

“How did you know we found her in the forest?”

“Well...she...TOLD me. What’s going on?”

“Hobbestep...Silentsneak wasn’t here yesterday. You started talking to no one...” mumbled Gemma.

“What? But, but Prix saw her!”

Gemma looked even more uncomfortable.

“Prix couldn’t have seen her, and nether could you. Silentsneak died of malnutrition a little over a week ago.”

Chapter Forty-One

My contentment melted away. It slid right off me like water off a duck. I could feel the colour drain from my face, not that you would be able to tell through my fur. My mouth fell open. Silentsneak could NOT be dead. I saw her yesterday. I KNEW I’d seen her.

“T-that’s impossible. I-is this some sort of...some sort of sick joke? It’s not FUNNY!” My breathing became uneven and shaky.

Gemma looked as panicked as I felt. Starya was the one who answered me.

“No Hobblestep. You’re friend is dead. I am sorry for your loss...”

“N-no! She, she’s NOT! She CAN’T be! You’re LYING!” Tears were flowing down my face uncontrollably.

“I assure you-”

“I don’t WANT assurances! Your word obviously means nothing! I WON’T believe she’s dead!” I screamed.

“Hobblestep calm down-”

“No! I-I’m getting out of here! Leave me alone!” I was roaring at my full volume by this time. My face was wet and I could feel the water seeping into my scars, darkening them, making them even more contrasting on my pelt.

I tore off into the jungle. I didn’t know why I was running. I didn’t know where I was going. I suppose I was trying to simply get away. From everyone. What if Silentsneak really WAS dead. What did that mean? That I was insane? That I had lost my mind completely? But how could that be? I’d heard her voice, smelled her scent, felt her pelt when I’d nuzzled her. And Prix had seen her too. Unless I had imagined Prix as well... Great savannah what was WRONG with me? I was so busy thinking that I didn’t pay attention to where I was going, and ran straight into Thunder.

I stopped, and looked up at his face. He looked like he was going to growl something about watching where I was going, but he must have noticed the tears that were still coming down my face in waves.

“Hey, what’s wrong?” He asked.

“N-nothing.”

“No, there’s something wrong. Come on, I saved your life, that automatically makes me the solver of all your problems. So lets hear it.”

“I said there’s NOTHING WRONG, now let me go past.”

“What are you running from?”

I glared at him.

“It can’t hurt to talk about it.”

“It can hurt you.” I hissed, and before I knew it, I’d flashed my paw forward and scratched a long bleeding line across his snout. He roared in pain and threw me a savage glare.

“What’d you do that for, WARTHOG FACE?” He snarled.

I couldn’t help but give a small squeak at his insult. Warthogs were the very ugliest prey there was on the savannah. For the first time in quite a while, I felt extremely self-conscious about my scars. My heart felt alive with pain. For Silentsneak, for my own hideous appearance.

“You want to go running off into the jungle? Well be my guest.” He bared his white teeth at me. I bared mine back at him and walked past.

I walked for a long time. I found it odd that no one followed me. Gemma quite obviously thought I’d gone insane, and you’d think they’d keep an eye on someone if that’s what they thought about them. But I heard and saw no one but my own shadow. When my legs decided they didn’t want to walk any more, I wholeheartedly agreed and lay down to sleep.

Seconds after sleep over came me, my eyes flew open. Not into the real world. I was in the white place. This didn’t surprise me of course, the three kings had made a habit of visiting me frequently in my sleep. I waited for one of them to appear, but they didn’t. Suddenly I saw that the whiteness was clearing away like mist. Instead of just revealing more whiteness, I could make out a palm tree, and the smooth white surface below my feet shifted into sand, but all around my newly formed environment, was still the whiteness. I walked cautiously over to the tree. It stood beside a medium sized water hole. The water inside was clear and smelled sweet. I bent down to take a sip, it was cool and crisp. Somehow sweet as well.

When I took my muzzled out of the water, I could clearly see my reflection, my clear green eyes looked back at me, as they usually did. My face was different though. Scarless. My ‘wart hog face’ was gone. I was just a normal lioness here. In the land of the dead. I looked into my reflection, I could almost be called beautiful like this. A single tear slid down my scar free face and landed in the water. It created a ripple in the pure blue. When the ripple disappeared there was a face beside mine in the water. I gasped in shock, it was a perfect copy of me, my exact face, but on a paler, golden pelt. I stepped away from the water hole in shock. But there she was, beside me. It wasn’t just a reflection. She was there. A beautiful golden lioness, but she looked just like me...I stared at her. Gaping. She turned. I saw my face staring back at me. Scarless, true, and it was a different colour – golden and cream – but I knew my face, and that was it. Identical features, and green eyes stared back at me. She had a cream coloured shape on her chest. It was a circle with ovals outlining it. It looked like a simplified version of the sun and

it's rays. She looked me over critically. I felt inferior to the lioness, my plain dark tan coat was so dull compared to her bright one.

"Surprised?" Her voice was...it was MY voice. But more confident, louder, and smoother. But it was still mine.

I was too shocked to answer.

"Oh you are adorable aren't you? You're so clueless to everything. I suppose I was the same way." She laughed, "But that was a very, very long time ago."

My own voice was mocking me. I couldn't form my thoughts enough to be angry, or embarrassed, or anything still, but in awe.

"W-who are you?"

"Oh that doesn't matter. I just couldn't contain my curiosity. Lite was right though. We are the same. It's so strange. Though, I guess you're even more surprised than I am, because you weren't told about it. You weren't told about much were you?"

I shook my head at...her...or was she...me?

"Do you need some answers?" She asked me coolly.

I nodded, everyone else I'd met here had refused to tell me anything about the secrets that shrouded me, but she...or...I....seemed more than willing.

"If you do, then a word of advice, no one up here can tell you. Or rather, WILL tell you. And there is only one in the mortal world that knows, and is not bound by the oath that prevents the rest of us from speaking the full truth about who and what you are to you. He is of the only group of lions who live in the jungle. The leopards you have been sharing the company of do not know of their existence, hardly anyone does. I can tell you exactly where they are, and who you need to help you."

She seemed overly helpful. But I felt a strange trust. It didn't SEEM right, but my instincts seemed to be screaming that it WAS right. That she was just as sincere in her wishes to help me as she claimed.

"You must seek out Argon, he lives at the heart of the jungle. His group dares live where no others will, due north from where you lay right now. Go to him, he will tell you. It is the only way." She told me.

"Good. Now run along."

The white place faded away, and I awoke, still staring forward at the strange golden lioness...who had been a carbon copy of...me.

Chapter Forty-Two

When I awoke, I was not where I'd fallen asleep. And I wasn't alone. I could hear arguing voices from a few lion-lengths away. I sat up, my head throbbing from sobbing so hard before I'd gone to sleep. My vision was blurry from sleep, and I looked around stupidly for where the voices were coming from.

"Why did you even want her BACK here anyway!? She's OBVIOUSLY gone mad, I say, let her wander around and get herself killed in the jungle." I heard a thunderous voice roar angrily.

"Thunder, listen-"

"No, no, YOU listen, Gemma. Do you KNOW how hard it is to carry a sleeping lioness through the jungle without waking her up? It is really, REALLY difficult! And I've got to ask myself, WHY am I doing it? I don't even LIKE her! She scratched my face when I tried to HELP her. And not lightly either, it's going to leave a scar!"

"Oh suck it up Thunder. It's not like you were much of a catch before the scar. Besides, it adds...personality. And we're helping her because she's NOT mad. Sarya says this happens a lot to new comers in the jungle."

"New comers to the jungle have chats with dead buddies a lot, eh?"

"Well they don't usually SEE them...but lots of times they hear their voice or catch their scent."

"That's different Gemma."

"Know what? Sometimes I like Prix a lot better than you Thunder. He knows how to handle these things. You should have seen him when she started rambling at the air. He didn't even break a sweat. He was...amazing." Gemma gave a small sigh.

"Oh spare me the Prix speech. His mate only died a few moon cycles back. Give the guy some space before you jump on him like a lion on a zebra."

"I'm not-"

“Prix had a mate?” I perked up, this interested me. Prix seemed too childish to have had a mate, and too happy to have had one that died fairly recently.

Both of their heads whipped around. I noticed that the scratch I’d put on Thunder’s face was bright red and a little bit swollen. It made him look positively ridiculous. Gemma squeaked self-consciously when she realized I’d been eavesdropping. After a long pause Thunder answered me.

“Yea. His mate was named Meeka. She was one of Starya’s cubs. They grew up together and fell in love. She was killed by an elephant at the beginning of dry season. Gemma here was adopted by Starya, she grew up with Prix too, and has always been jealous of our dear Meeka because Prix liked her instead of Gemma. Because Gemma is a back stabbing hyena-hearted fool, I think she set Meeka up to be trampled by those elephants so that she could have Prix all to herself.” Thunder grinned mean-spiritedly at Gemma whose mouth was wide open in shock.

“THUNDER!! Meeka was my BEST FRIEND!” She cried, her eyes growing shiny with tears.

“And the plot thickens.”

“When did you become such a pompous pig? What’s WITH you today?? You KNOW I’m still mourning for Meeka!”

“Funny way of mourning you’ve got there. Tryna steal her mate.”

Gemma’s mouth hung open. She closed it, and looked like she was about to say something, but then decided against it. Tears began to run down her face. Thunder’s hard expression melted at the sight of her crying.

“Gemma...I’m sorry...I just...”

“L-look Thunder. I don’t care. J-just...just leave me alone.” She hissed quietly, and began to trot off.

Thunder lowered his head. *Smooth, Thunder, real smooth.* I thought. He’d said all those horrible things and only felt bad after he’d driven his so called friend to tears and made her run off. His eyes wandered in my direction, and lit up in surprise and embarrassment as if he’d forgotten I was there, which, he probably had. His face froze over and he growled at me grouchily.

“What are YOU staring at?”

“Well that whole thing was a reply to MY question genius.” He stared at me with hostility for a few more seconds, and suddenly his head shot up and he stared to the left intently.

I followed his gaze, and several seconds later my ears picked up the slightest sound of paw steps. How had he heard that??

Another few seconds later, the blind leopard healer, - Starya – emerged from the foliage. She stared right at me.

“It is good to see Thunder delivered you safely back.”

I would have replied, but was too preoccupied wondering how in the world she knew where to look.

“Pfft. Not to me.” Snarled Thunder quietly.

Starya ignored him and kept staring at me.

“I wonder why they chose you...” She thought out loud. This confused me. Who? What was this choosing event?

“Who...?” I asked.

“The Last Kingdom.” She answered simply.

“Starya, The Last Kingdom doesn’t exist. That’s a cub’s tale. Mothers tell their cubs about that place to take up time. It’s not as if there is a REALLY a colony of grey lions. That’s just stupid.” Growled Thunder ill temperedly.

Since my mother had effectively stopped caring about me when I was quite young, I hadn’t heard the tales of ‘the last kingdom’.

“What’s that?”

Thunder gave me an annoyed look.

“You know? The last kingdom? The maaaaaagical land of maaaaaagical lions who maaaaagically go about their maaaaaagical lives. All the maaaaaagic takes the colour from their pelts so they turn maaaaaagically grey. They don’t live in prides, oh no, but one, big maaaaaagical kingdom.” He told me mockingly.

Starya frowned.

“The legend says that there is a colony of grey lions true. They do live in a place that has a magic of sorts about it. A curse. Though, this whole jungle is cursed, but where they dare live, the curse is stronger, and those who are weak of soul are consumed by it. But live there they do, and exist, they do.” She said calmly.

“Starya, I’m SURE they don’t-”

The arrival of a new comer interrupted Thunder. A massive grey male lion stepped out from the same place Starya had come from. He had a pale grey pelt and a dark grey, almost black, mane.

“I am a representative of the great lion Argon, the leader, the elder, and the healer of our kingdom. He summons the cripple, he has a message to relay. From the Gods.”

Chapter Forty-Three

I stared dumbly at the big grey lion who stood calmly in front of us.

“Cripple meaning me?”

He nodded.

“Gods meaning...like....G-Gods?”

Another nod.

“For me.”

Yet another nod.

“Me, Hobblestep, Gods, GODS have a message for ME?”

“You sound like an idiot. We’ve figured that part out all ready cobweb-brain.” Growled Thunder. He turned to the grey lion, “Where does he summon the all mighty cripple to?”

“The Valley Of Living Spirits.”

Thunder gave him a doubtful look.

“I must have swallowed a weird mushroom or something. Because, apparently, I’m talking to a lion that shouldn’t exist, from a pride that doesn’t exist, about taking a cripple to a place that doesn’t exist to get a message from a lion who also, doesn’t exist, about Gods who...don’t exist.”

The lion gave him an annoyed glare.

“Don’t try to wrap your puny mind around it. Just give me The One, and we will leave you to your small, pointless life.”

“Oh, and your lives aren’t as pointless as mine?”

“You have no idea how important the cripple is. No idea at all. Unlike you, she matters. But don’t try to understand that ether.”

Thunder bared his teeth and looked like he was going to attack the grey lion. Though, his face didn’t look very threatening, his swollen scratch just made him look goofy.

“All right, that’s enough. I’m going. Ok? I’ll be out of your fur.” I walked over to stand beside the grey lion who gave a small smile of satisfaction.

Sarya’s sightless gaze followed me. Eerie pure pupil-less blue.

“I won’t allow her to go alone.” She told the grey lion.

“I don’t think you have the right to make that decision leopard. The One has made her choice.” Hissed the grey lion.

“She is my patient, thus my responsibility. Let Thunder go with you, so that he can watch over her.”

At the same moment, both my face and Thunder’s twisted in displeasure. We both started quickly listing reasons why that wasn’t a very good idea. I wanted to go see Argon, who according the lioness in my dream, could tell me who I was. Why I was so special. I didn’t want Thunder to come along and ruin it. Judging by what I knew of him, he’d probably just end up attacking the grey lion pride.

Sarya silenced both of us with a look.

“I will not let my patient go running off into the jungle with out an escort I can trust.”

“Then let Gemma go! Or how about Prix?” Cried Thunder.

“Gemma would not be a good protector. And Prix is distracted too easily. Thunder, go.” She stared him down with her intense blue eyes. He seemed to visibly shrink under her burning gaze. A tiny laugh escaped my throat.

He whipped his head around and glared at me.

“Go Thunder.” Sarya told him.

He grimaced and walked over.

“Yes ma’am...” He growled, looking at his paws like a sulking cub.

The grey lion rolled his eyes.

“He has a mane, but he’s a cub.” He growled under his breath, “Should we be off then?” He asked.

I nodded. And Thunder gave one last, sulky look at Sarya, then nodded slowly, sighing and growling inaudibly.

We trudged through the thick jungle terrain for hours. It was noon, when the sun was highest. Or, so Thunder and the grey lion said. I wasn’t sure how they could tell, seeing as, there was no way to see the sun through the canopy of moss covered branches, and leaves full of life.

“Soo...you guys really magic?” Thunder asked the grey lion, speaking for the first time since we’d left.

“No.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“No killing prey with your mind?”

“No.”

“No stealing misbehaving cubs?”

“No.”

“No using magic to control thoughts?”

“No.”

“No making things float by looking at them?”

“No.”

I could practically see the smoke coming out of the smoky grey lions ears. Thunder was doing this on purpose. He knew that he could get under this lion’s skin.

“No-”

The grey lion stopped and faced Thunder, his teeth bared, fully exposing the sharp white points.

“You listen here Cub lion! We are NOT magical. We are simply loyal to the old ways, unlike you spoiled traitors of the savannah!”

Thunder didn’t even flinch.

“Ah, then why are you all grey?”

“We are all descendant from a small group of lions the majority of which happened to be grey.”

“I know a grey lion called Ghost who isn’t part of your little group. Does that mean he’s descended from the same lions?”

“Ghost is a fool. When he became our keeper of memories he turned his back on us. He tried to become a pride lion, but failed. Now he lives on the fringes of the jungle, preaching things pride lions would never understand. He doesn’t realize that you are all a lower species of lion. Living like savages on the open savannah...in your ‘prides’.”

“Aaaand why don’t YOU live in prides like any NORMAL lions?”

“Because prides are the result of lies and fear! We live the true way. The way Sunce wills us to. You pride lions disgust me, you have abandoned the gods. Sunce, and Oblak, mean nothing to you. You are nothing but dirty traitors. Scoundrels who should be crushed under the power of the great Sunce! Her time is coming. The time when the OLD ways are the norm. The prides will be abolished!” The grey lion’s words were rising in speed and volume and he spoke. By the end he was roaring loudly. After he said it, he snapped his jaw shut.

“I’m...I’m going to go catch something to eat.” He told us, his voice shaking slightly. He trotted off into the jungle.

We both watched him leave. Confused. After a long silence Thunder spoke.

“Now I know why they wanted you. You can be among your own kind there, the mentally unstable.” He smirked.

I narrowed my eyes. Two could play at that game.

“Too bad there isn’t a baboon family around. You’d fit right in with that big red scar on your face.”

“Looked at your own face recently?”

We glared at each other. Time passed, and neither of us spoke. Too much time. Where did the grey lion go? I finally broke the silence.

“Where’d our guide go?”

“I don’t know. I’ll go looking for him. You stay here.” Said Thunder, stretching.

“Yes sir.” I growled, and rested my head on my paws in boredom.

Thunder walked off into the jungle and I was alone. Or so I thought. I heard a twig snap behind me. I turned around, my heart beating fast in my chest.

“W-who’s there?”

Through the shadows, I caught a glimpse of the grey lion’s mane. I let out a sigh of relief.

“Great you’re back! Thunder just went looking for....” My words faded as a someone stepped out of the shadows. The grey lion was there, yes, but he was dead. The creature held him in its jaws. His blood oozed slowly onto the ground, a steady beat of quiet thuds as the droplets hit the soil.

The creature that held him was like nothing I’d ever seen. It was huge and orange. A white muzzle, chest, belly, and paws. All stained red with the grey lion’s blood. It had thin, black spindly stripes. They weaved in and out of each other, and covered the creature’s body. It was of the cat family, but was larger and more densely built than a lion. Muscles rippled under its sleek orange and black pelt. Even though it was dark, whatever tiny beams of light that found their way into this place reflected all over its pelt. It had piercing yellow eyes.

It dropped the grey lion’s body.

“Hello Fallen Star. I have been sent to send your spirit back to the heavens where it belongs.” He paused, “By ridding you of your corporeal body.”

His black claws slid out of their white sheaths. He was here to kill me.

Chapter Forty-Four

The claws slid out, then back in, then out, sliding cleanly into the ground each time. Was he going to attack, or just stand there twiddling? He glanced up.

“Why don’t you run Fallen Star?” He had a deep, sensible sounding voice. It was almost a purr the way he strung his words together.

That was a good question. Someone who wanted to kill me was standing there playing with his claws and I was standing there like a new born. I tried to move my legs. Nothing budged. What? How could that be? I tried to yank at my legs, but they felt rooted into the soil.

“I-I...”

“I can tell you why. It’s because part of you knows you have to die. This broken shell is no place for what lies within it. You, subconsciously, know that you must leave this place, that is why you have come so close to death so many times.”

I tried to move my legs again but nothing happened.

The orange beast gently pushed the grey lion’s corpse out of his way and walked slowly over to me. The dim light gleamed on his pelt.

“So many times has fate willed you to die. You should have died as a cub. That was the plan of things. But you didn’t...So many times you have been saved. It’s miraculous what kind of things She is capable of when she wants something enough.”

Maybe I could talk my way out of this.

“S-she?”

“Sunce. The evil sun demon who has stolen the right God Oblak’s throne.”

Oh no. More God talk.

“She is trying to get to you. No matter what, never let that happen.”

“Well your going to kill me. So what I do won’t be much of a problem any more, will it?”

“I would never kill a Fallen Star! I am only helping you!”

“I don’t WANT your help! And what the hell is a Fallen Star?! What ever it is I’m NOT one! I-I don’t know what you did to my legs but let me go!”

“Fallen Star, you NEED my help. You just cannot understand it now,” He walked closer to me, and sat down, not even a grass blade length away. He had a strange, unfamiliar scent. Not of any creature I’d ever encountered. He tilted his head upward.

“When you look at the stars, what do you see?”

I didn’t look up. The memory of Proudmane telling Quickmane to look up into his eyes, and slashing his neck when it was exposed.

“I see lights in the sky. Stars. That’s it.” I snarled, still trying to figure out how to get out of this.

“Have you ever seen a falling star?”

“Yes...” I’d seen falling stars, they would shoot across the sky in brilliant colours at night.

“Have you ever wonders what happens when they hit the ground?”

“No.”

“Once they hit this earth, all they are is rock.”

I gave him a doubtful look.

“Ok.”

“Well, where does the glow go off to?”

“Why should I care? What are you getting at?”

“The glow goes into someone. The glow is a spirit, as it crashes down to earth, as does the spirit. It is very rare to have the glow enter into anything other than a plant, because

they are usually the closest thing. But a Fallen Star lion is incredibly rare. It is an unbreakable spirit. A spirit capable of intense emotions, burning rage and hatred to their enemies, and deep love and loyalty to those close to them. Don't you see that this broken body is not fit for the Fallen Star within? You have work to do in the next world, Fallen Star, but you have to die in order to do it."

The honest tone in his deep purring voice made me sure what he was saying was true. I was so confused. I didn't want to die. I wasn't some...some...fallen star...I wasn't any of that! All I wanted was to survive in this place. I didn't want all these complex riddles and legends...before I knew it I could feel the fur on my face grow wet with tear drops.

"P-please let me go..."

"But don't you see? I'm not the one holding you here. It's you. YOU control yourself, and part of you knows what I say is true. Fallen Star, please, you must die to fulfill your destiny."

I shivered and suddenly the side pushing for me to die was clearer in my head. Everything he said seemed so crystal clear. I had to die....that was it...my muscles relaxed and I braced myself to be murdered, totally calmly.

"Are you ready Fallen Star?" He whispered.

"Yes." My voice wasn't shaking anymore. I wasn't afraid...I had to fulfill my destiny...

"I shall try to make it as painless as possible-" He was cut off and as a lion rammed into his side.

"N-no!" I yelled.

It was Thunder. He was wrestling with the striped creature on the ground, tracking twigs in his dark mane. Thunder wasn't very large even by lion standards, and this creature dwarfed him. There was no way he could win the fight.

"No! G-get off of him!" I screamed. I didn't even know who I was screaming at, the one who wanted to kill me, or the one who wanted to save me. I wasn't sure of very much right then.

The striped creature overtook Thunder in an instant and grabbed his head in his jaws. It rammed his head in to a rock underneath them with sickening force. I heard Thunder's cry of agony split the air.

Suddenly I could control my legs again. I snapped out of my trance-like state. I didn't want to die, and I wasn't going to let Thunder die either! I ran at the striped creature and flung my paw out in front of my with all the force I could muster.

Immediately the orange striped creature dropped Thunder to the ground. The striped feline lashed his tail out behind him. I bared my teeth at him and let a low growl escape my muzzle.

He just stared at me like he couldn't believe what he was seeing. I let my growl grow louder. He turned his body, but kept his eyes locked on me until he had to turn around, and stumbled away. I don't know what I did to scare the massive creature off, but he seemed scared out of his wits.

I walked back to Thunder who was laying on the ground beside the blood covered rock. I gasped. He was hurt a lot worse than I thought he'd been! There was a small puddle of blood around his head, soaking into his mane. His paws were sprawled on the ground and his mouth was slightly open, his eyes loosely shut.

"Oh no...Th-Thunder...?" He looked like Spark had. Blood spilling from the back of his head...laying there on the ground...I lay down beside him. I pressed my body against his. I had some desperate belief that if I was beside him, sharing my life with him, my warmth, maybe he wouldn't go cold...and lose his own life...I didn't care that I really didn't like this lion at all. He'd saved my life twice now, and all I'd done was been rude to him. Why did everyone lose their life because of me? I was a plague...but before my thoughts could grow more morbid, Thunder did something Spark hadn't. His eyes opened in tiny slits.

"What are you...what are you doing there?" He asked, his voice was so weak and thin...my jaw trembled in fear that he would die there. I didn't want those half closed amber eyes of his never to open again once he closed them.

"I'm...um..." My voice shook, "I'm...keeping you safe..."

"You don't..." he coughed up droplets of blood, "You don't need to...to do that..." He mumbled quietly, his eyes glazed over, like he was only half conscious but still talking. I had no idea what to do.

"H-help!" I cried into the jungle, "Anybody! Please! He needs help! Is there a...a healer? Or...someone..." My voice died away when my pleas went unanswered. My whole body was shaking.

"Hey, hey...don't worry...I'll be fine..." Thunder told me weakly, his mouth barely moving as he spoke. Great. Was I so horrible at keeping my emotions in that the one

dying was comforting me, not the other way around? I calmed my body and stopped myself from shaking.

“Y-yea...of course you will...” I tried to sound soothing. It didn’t work. He gave me a skeptical look, his eyes still only open in slits. Suddenly they began to slide closed. No! No! If they closed, who knew if they’d ever open again!

“Th-Thunder! Um...I-lets talk about something!” I exclaimed suddenly, out of desperation.

His eyes opened slowly again, even more hazy and glazed over than before.

“No...I just want to sleep...I’m so...so tired...” He mumbled.

“B-but...y-you can’t sleep! I have to talk to you about...about something!”

“About what?” His voice was so quiet and soft. If I couldn’t make up conversation he’d be interested in, I wouldn’t be able to keep him awake. I tried to think quickly.

“Um...how about...Prix. A-and how he always changes my name every time me says it...?”

A tiny smile spread on Thunder’s bloody mouth. His eyes were so far away, I don’t think he was even aware we were having this conversation.

“Prix is usually wrong...but...he’s right this time....” Thunder’s voice was fading.

“Right about what?” I asked, trying to add extra exclamation to my voice, and say it louder to keep him interested.

“That you need a new...” His voice trailed off again, his eyes sliding closed.

“A new name? Um...um...Thunder! I need you to find me a new name! It’s, it’s really, really important that you don’t go to sleep because...I need a name!” I was talking to him like I’d talk to a cub, but he didn’t seem to notice or care. My voice was shaking again as I said that.

“O....ok...” He mumbled. His eyes more open than before, even though they barely peeked out of his eye lids, I could still see them as they looking into my own eyes, and I fought the urge to look away from his bloodied, delirious face. “I think...you should have...a...a good name...not a pride name....”

“Yes? W-what name Thunder?”

“You should be...be called...Storm....” He whispered, his words almost barely audible.

“Why Thunder?” But his eyes were sliding shut again.

“Thunder??”

There was no response.

“Thunder!” I wailed, pressing my nose into his mane.

“No...no...no....” I sobbed into his thick brown mane.

I heard something drop to the ground beside me.

I looked up and behind from where I lay.

There was a pretty female leopard standing there. She was pure black with bright blue eyes. She pushed a chunk of bark with some sort of paste on it toward me.

“Lick this onto your tongue then lick his wound. It should slow down the bleeding.” She said gently. She had a soft sweet voice, “You did well keeping him awake. Now you apply the mixture on, and I’ll go get Starya and Gemma.”

I tugged the chunk of bark closer and did as I was told, licking Thunder’s wound in long strokes with the green paste on my tongue. I tried to ignore the taste of blood that flooded over my taste buds. I tried not to think about it.

“That’s right. Now, stay with him.” Said the black leopard, before turning to walk away.

“Wait! Who are you?” I called after her. She looked back at me.

“My name is Meeka.”

Chapter Forty-Five

Meeka. The name seemed familiar. It wasn’t until the black leopard had disappeared into the jungle that I remembered where I’d heard it. Prix’s dead mate. Her name had been Meeka. I rationalized with myself that it must just be another Meeka. But in my heart, I knew this was the Meeka they spoke of. It made sense, because apparently the dead Meeka was the head healer, Starya’s daughter, so she would have to know something about remedies.

But I didn't dwell on the fact that I seemed to have seen another ghost for long. All I cared about was that someone was going to find the healers, that the paste I'd put on Thunder's wound should help him survive long enough for them to get there. All I cared about right then was him surviving. I lay there beside him; he drifted in and out of consciousness over the hours, calling me by the name Storm. When the jungle was at its blackest, and the crickets and birds were chirping softly into the darkness, I couldn't keep my eyes open any longer. I fell asleep beside Thunder, hoping to the Savannah, or Sunce or Oblak, or who ever was out there that I wouldn't wake to be beside a corpse.

I woke up to an angry hiss.

"Get out of my way!"

I blinked the sleep away from my eyes, not quite sure what was going on, or where I was.

"Move!"

"Hobblestep you have to get out of the way for Starya to examine Thunder." I heard a gentle voice say. At first I thought it was Meeka, but when I opened my eyes, it was Gemma and Starya who stood in front of me.

"Wha....?" I began, disoriented.

Starya just rolled her pure blue eyes and shoved me out of the way with her full force.

"Ow!" I hissed, getting up. When my side left the ground the wind hit it like a weight. I shivered a little, realizing my side was all wet. I looked over at it, and was horrified to find that it was covered in blood. I was covered on one side of my body with Thunder's spilt blood. The night before came surging back into my memory.

Immediately I darted to Starya's side as she examined his head injury. She shook her head gravely.

"What does that mean? Shaking your head? Does that mean he's going to die?!" I cried.

"He has a severe concussion, and internal bleeding." She told me.

"S-so he's going to die?!?" I panicked, breathing unsteadily.

Starya gave me an annoyed look.

“Under the care of any other Healer, he very well may have died, but I’m not the head healer of the whole jungle for no reason.”

I calmed down a little bit. She glared at me.

“But if you don’t give me some breathing room I may just SLIP UP. Get out of here.” She hissed with hostility. I frowned and slowly backed off.

“Come on. Let’s get you cleaned off.” Said Gemma gently, steering me away from Starya and Thunder.

Gemma led me through the jungle and down a rocky cliff covered in soft, slippery moss. The rocks were warm and a little bit wet. They led down to a sandy beach in front of a small spring. I looked into the clear water suspiciously. Gemma smiled.

“Don’t worry. This spring’s too small for anything to live in but the seaweed. It’s safe to go in and get washed off.” She informed me. I nodded in thanks and waded into the warm water. I didn’t really like how the water felt on my legs, and the soggy soil beneath my paws. I waded in deeper anyway, and let the water slowly soak the blood out of my fur.

“So what happened to you guys anyway?” asked Gemma, perched on a rock that jutted out of the rock face.

“A striped orange...creature attacked us.”

Gemma’s ears pricked.

“A tiger?”

“I’ve never heard of a tiger...”

“There’s one that used to live around here called Shakaar. We chased him out, this may mean he’s back...”

“Wait, nobody told you it was a...a ‘tiger’ that attacked us?”

She looked at me oddly.

“No.”

“Well how did you find us?”

“Sarya said she heard Thunder yell, I didn’t hear anything, but she’s blind so I guess her hearing is better than mine...”

She heard him scream...I didn’t think she did. Meeka must have told her...Sarya must be able to see...or...hear the dead too. I jumped out of the water, and shook out my pelt.

“Gemma, I have to go see Sarya.”

“Didn’t she JUST tell you to get lost? I wouldn’t test her patience if I were you.”

“Good thing you’re not me.”

I climbed up the rocky cliff and ran back to where Sarya and Thunder were. I found Sarya standing near Thunder, but not directly over him.

She raised her blind gaze in my direction.

“What do you want?” she asked, not half as hostile as when Gemma had been there.

“I want to know how you found Thunder and I.”

“I heard Thunder-”

“No, I want to know how you REALLY found us.”

The wise old leopard paused.

“Meeka told me.”

“I thought Meeka was dead.”

Another long pause.

“She is.”

I shivered.

“Alright. You listen to me Sarya. There is something about this place...something... wrong. Tell me what it is. Tell me the truth.”

Sarya looked at me with her eerie eyes.

“The truth is in the eye of the beholder. It changes every second of every day. The truth is, that the truth doesn’t exist.”

“Then tell me the closest thing!” I snarled.

Starya nodded slowly.

“All right.”

She looked down, thoughtfully, then began.

“This place where we are has many names, the Place Of Shadows, to most outsiders, The King’s Lost Paradise, to some who look back on the old days, but to the few of use who were born here, to the few of us who know this place well, it is known as the Place Of The Walking Dead. The spirits of those dead do not escape this place easily.”

“Why?”

“Long, long ago there was a massive battle, among lions,” The memories of the battle I’d witnessed in my dreams when I’d first come to the jungle came to my mind in a flash, Starya continued, “This jungle was once ruled by three mighty kings, lions. Their names were Centurion, Stagnos, and Kronos,” I recognized the first two names, but in my dreams the third king had been named Lite, not Kronos.

“They lived in peace with one another. Their kingdoms spread over the savannah, but they made their home here. This jungle was said to be the most beautiful and plentiful place in our known world. Only the noble in blood lived here. But one, dark day, Kronos was murdered. He died at the paws of his own son. Lite. Lite did not deny that he was his father’s murderer, he didn’t lie, or cheat, he just did what he did, with no shame at all. Kronos’s kingdom was shocked at first, but quickly forgave Lite. Mostly because of his way with words, and his unearthly magnificence. According to the old stories, Lite almost God-like in his appearance.”

So that was how Lite fit into it. Had Stagnos and Kronos been friends? Was that why he was always glaring at Lite? God-like would be a mild way of describing Lite. It was almost dizzying to be around him.

“The only one who even compared to light appearance-wise, was Stagnos’s beautiful daughter. Lite was intrigued by the beautiful princess, and wooed her into agreeing to be his mate. They were to be the most magnificent pair of monarchs that the world had ever seen, but Stagnos forbid it. Stagnos didn’t trust Lite, because he had murdered his best friend, Kronos, and he did not intend to have his daughter become Lite’s mate.

“The princess did not see it his way. She had been spoiled her entire life, and was angered, that for the first time, she hadn’t gotten something she’d wanted. She went to her father’s den and screamed at him, she told him that she hated him, and that she would go with Lite, against his wishes or not. She snuck out of their kingdom and went to Lite’s that night. Over the next month she gave Lite’s kingdom information that let them take more than half of Stagnos’ territory away with very little force.

“Stagnos was angered. He could not believe that Lite had driven his own daughter to such betrayal. He was hurt that she did not care about her true kingdom, not for her own father. Out of rage he declared war with Lite’s kingdom. Lite, all too willingly agreed, and thus it began, Centurion told his kingdom to stay neutral, but when the battle did not end quickly members of his kingdom slowly left, joining into the fighting for which ever side they supported.

“Lions fell by the hundreds, the leopards were left to hide and hope they would not become victim to the vicious frustrations of soldiers as they watched everyone they cared about fall. Eventually a great leader named Stone decided the only way to stop the fighting was to kill those pushing for it to continue. Stone and his followers killed all three kings, even though Centurion was neutral in the battle, they wanted nothing more to do with kings.”

I remembered my other dream, where they had dropped the bodies of the kings, on top of the mass of bodies in that pit, then split off into prides.

“Too many had died by that time though. So many that the spirit world couldn’t hold them all, a pocket in the fabric of the afterlife was created here. One in which the only ones who rule are the three dead kings. Their souls are forced to stay here for eternity, forced to watch over the souls which are trapped in this jungle. Many of these wandering souls can take form and be heard by the living, but I have never heard of one who can actually see them...none but me.”

“Wait...but...Starya, aren’t you blind...?”

She heaved a sigh.

“I haven’t always been...”

“But how...?”

She shook her head at me.

“Doesn’t matter.”

“But-”

Starya cut me off and abruptly continued with her story of the kings.

“After her mate and her father were murdered, Stagnos’ daughter couldn’t live with herself. So she ended her life. She refused to eat, and barely slept, until one day she was gone. After her death, the climate changed radically. The entire Savannah used to be like this jungle, lush and green, but after the princess’s death, it all died, and became the barren wasteland it is today. This, small patch, was the only place not effected by the changes.”

“What!?! How can one lioness’s death effect the climate!?!”

“This place was left as a reminder of what used to be. It was an apology to her father that went unanswered. The dry season only came to be after the princess’s death. They say she only wanted to be loved, as she was in life, so she shines down on everything, over heating the land, killing what once flourished. Most say she is greedy and egotistic, but I believe she does this because she thinks it is right, and she is looking for some...some kind of forgiveness for all the horrible things she caused.”

I’d heard this story before. It sounded so familiar to the one Duskflame had told me in the dog pack. I knew what Starya was going to say before she said it.

“This princess’s name, was Sunce.”

Chapter Forty-Six

“What? B-but I thought Sunce was a God...?”

Starya just nodded.

“W-wait...if Sunce was the princess, who was that other one? The rain one...um... Oblak.”

“Oblak lived as a lion many, many years before as a member of Centurion’s kingdom. He was peaceful, and calm. Characteristics of most of the members of Centurion’s kingdom.”

“Well...what was so special about him?”

“Nothing...he lived a fairly uneventful life, lived to old age, and died peacefully. This may be why he is such a calm god. Unlike Sunce, who lived a turbulent life, so continues to be a turbulent Goddess.” Starya explained.

I was perplexed. The way she told this story, what I’d thought were silly myths and superstitions...could they be real?

“Starya, you’re a leopard. How do you know so much about what happened to the lions?”

Starya tilted her head toward the moist ground.

“It’s not important.” She sighed.

“But-”

Her blind eyes suddenly flew up and stared into me.

“Life is cruel, Hobblestep. Blessings are treated like curses, and curses like blessings. What’s fair and what’s not doesn’t come into it. I was born with a blessing, and it became a curse. That is all you need know about me.” Hissed the old leopard with such intensity that I had to take a submissive step backwards.

She let her gaze sink back to the ground.

“Go get some rest. You’ve had a hard day.” She murmured, then retreated back to Thunder’s side.

I nodded slowly and walked away. No one had told me where to sleep, so I just wandered around the unfamiliar jungle until I found a wide fallen tree. I peeked inside and it was hollow. I tentatively crawled inside. It wasn’t even a very tight squeeze. Inside the hollow trunk it was cool and dark. It made me feel somehow safe, somehow...secure. I quickly fell asleep.

But my eyes slid open. Not in the waking world though. In the White Place. The three kings were there. All of their eyes trained on me.

“Starya has told you.” Stated Stagnos. His dark brown mane looked particularly dull that day, and his honey amber eyes looked utterly defeated, the skin seemed to hang loser on his paler brown pelt, and he just looked over all older.

I nodded.

“Well THAT takes a weight off!” Exclaimed Lite casually.

Centurion stayed silent, his pale pink eyes watching me. Instead of ignoring him, I looked straight back at him.

“How do you know Starya’s name?”

All three kings were quiet.

“Well?” I asked.

“Well...we used to visit her in her dreams...” Lite told me, earning himself yet another disapproving glare from Stagnos. Lite simply threw an impossibly handsome smile back at him.

“What happened to her?”

“She made certain sacrifices...” Growled Stagnos angrily.

“What do you mean?”

“She went to Sunce for help. BAD MOVE.” Hissed Lite darkly. I thought he’d been her mate. He’d caused the whole war because he’d wanted to be her mate so badly! Why was he talking about her like this now?

“Why would that be bad?” I asked.

Stagnos eyed me seriously.

“Her cubs had died in her stomach.” He told me.

“What? But she had-”

“Let me speak!” He roared.

I lowered my head in respect, and his face suddenly softened, at which point he let a mask of apathy slide over his face.

“Starya was born with a particularly strong connection to the dead. She could see them, as you can. And she could speak to them in dreams, sometimes even command them. Starya was a bright young leopardess. She lived only to make others happy...so... unselfish. Which is a virtue, in most cases. But...it ended up to be her weakness.

“She had spoken to us often, we were like her extended family. We showed her things in the past, told her things, that we had never trusted any other mortal with. But one day,

near when she was expected to have her cubs, the kicking stopped. When there was no kicking for days, she deemed the cubs dead. Starya...she was...heartbroken. Such a caring soul, she was broken by the experience.

“It pained all of us to see her in pain. But there was nothing we could do. She begged us for help, she cried, she screamed, but we were powerless. So instead of letting them go, she vowed to find someone that could change it. That could make them live again. She found Sunce.” Stagnos’s voice cracked when he mentioned his daughter. He seemed to shrink a size, to die a little bit on the inside when he thought of her.

“Sunce...she...she meant well...but...Sunce didn’t know what she was doing. She proposed to take some energy from Starya, and transfer it to the cubs inside her. It would make them live again, she did warn Starya that there would be side effects, even though Sunce herself wasn’t sure what they would be. Starya whole heartedly agreed, and it was done. The next day our Starya woke up blind. Her eyes totally useless. But she felt the tiny kicks inside her, again. She...she never got the chance to see her cubs that she had fought so hard to keep alive.

“And when they were born, all 3 were black. Black cubs were signs of bad luck, and none of what she had once called friends would help her. She was a blind leopard in a world that relied on sight to live, with 3 cubs to feed.

“Sunce thought she could make amends by giving Starya the ancient knowledge of medicines and herbs. Starya was the very first healer. She was strong in spirit, and never uttered one complaint. She did her best to live blind, using her other senses to survive. But she blocked us from coming to her in her dreams. And she blocked out the voices of the dead. She cut herself off from our world. From her gift of insight.” Stagnos finished.

There was a silence. 3 cubs. She’d had 3 black cubs, and adopted Gemma and Thunder. I knew one of her cubs had been Meeka, but I had no idea about the other two. The silence grew. I wasn’t too certain WHY he’d told me Starya’s life story, it was interesting and all, but did it really have anything to do with me?

“Moral of the story is don’t take help from Sunce ‘cause she’ll mess it up. Now that THAT’S out of the way, how about you and me get to know each other better now that you can see dead people and all? I could just drop in, ya know?” Lite threw an impossibly handsome smile my way and I wanted to faint. No wonder Sunce had left her kingdom for him.

“Um...uh...” I couldn’t put together words again. Why did this always happen with handsome males!?

He walked closer with his insufferably graceful movements. He was stopped in mid stride as Stagnos launched himself from his calm sitting position to pin Lite down.

“You listen HERE. You stay AWAY from her. I’ve told you before, your little games can be wasted on someone else. ANYONE but her.” He roared in Lite’s still smug looking face.

“Geeze, you sound like her FATHER.” He hissed through a gleefully spiteful smile which I didn’t understand.

Suddenly the White Place was fading and I was waking up.

“Anyone in there? Martha? You in there?” I heard a familiar voice call.

“Not my name Prix.” I growled playfully, squeezing out of my log.

“Sweet! So how are you doing? I heard that idiot Shakaar attacked you. Tigers CREEP ME OUT. Don’t they creep you out? With that vooooooice, and those faces...Ugh. Anywho, I hear you’re ok but Thunder got beaten alive. Staya told me to tell you that he is healing pretty well so far and that he should make a full recovery or something like that. I don’t know how she knows if he’s gonna be ok or not. It’s not like she can see it is it? Healers are so odd sometimes...”

“Slow down Prix. So what you’re trying to say, is Thunder’s going to be all right?”

“Didn’t I just SAY that?” He smiled playfully.

I tried to imagine his playful self paired with the sweet leopard ghost that had helped Thunder and I. It wasn’t hard to imagine him making her laugh. I wondered how much he missed her, but didn’t dare ask.

“Ooooo and one more thing.” Prix said suddenly.

“Yes?”

“Ready for this?”

“Yep.”

“Deep breaths now, you may want to sit down for this one.”

“I’m fine standing Prix.” I laughed.

“It’s STILL bone dry out in the savannah, I was checking it out yesterday. How did you LIVE out there?”

“Thank you, genius.” I giggled, “It’s ALWAYS dry in the savannah!”

“Right. Oh, and one last little thing.”

I rolled my eyes.

“All right, shoot.”

“Your buddy, Feather’s awake and his cheetah friends are visiting with him AS WE SPEAK”

I had to take deep breaths, and fell into a sitting position.

Chapter Forty-Seven

“Well what are you WAITING for!? Don’t you wanna SEE him?” Prix exclaimed.

I stood up.

“Show me the way!”

Prix winked.

“Just follow me.”

He suddenly took off into the jungle. I chased as fast as I could but he was too fast.

“Prix! Slow DOWN!”

I heard no more footsteps. I growled in frustration.

“Whatcha waitin for Keiko?”

I heard the voice from above me.

I hissed up at his smug face.

“Prix! Just show me the way are.”

Prix’s head lowered and he whispered into my ear.

“We’re all ready here.”

“Wha...?”

He motioned to some bushes and I pushed through them. My heart leapt with joy. I saw Feather sitting there. He was speaking to a pretty adult cheetah.

She had the slender figure that all cheetahs shared. Her lightly built frame looked like it could be blown away by a tiny breeze, like a feather in the wind. Her golden pelt was paler than the leopards that I’d been living with.

“Feather!” I called. His face turned my way and lit up brighter than the sun.

“Hobbs! Oh my gosh! Hobbs it’s really you!” He cried, leaving Dapple to bound over to me.

I nuzzled him enthusiastically, my whole body tingling in excitement of seeing him. He was bigger than me now. A thick red-brown mane framed his broad face, his feather shaped blaze between his eyes contrasting the pale golden-red colouring of his fur. I rested my chin on his shoulder, my face buried in his thick mane. Feather’s scent flooded over me and I couldn’t be happier to see him.

“Oh Feather. When did you have time to GROW so much? Your bigger than ME now!”

“I was just wondering when you had time to shrink.”

I laughed into his mane, then realized quite suddenly that I was crying. Those darn tear ducts just couldn’t contain themselves anymore could they?

“Oh, I’m sorry Feather! I’m getting your mane all wet!” I squeaked, pulling my face away.

He smiled at me sweetly.

“Do you think I CARE? You like my mom! You can cry into my mane as much as you want. Consider it your official shoulder to cry on.”

I actually had to look UP to look into Feather’s eyes. I wasn’t really used to this, I’d had to look up into Golden’s eyes too, but the male I’d been spending the most time with was Thunder. He was small for a male, and was right at eye level with me, while the leopards were SMALLER. It’d been a long time since I’d gotten to look up.

I was so struck by how much Feather looked like Golden. The exact same broad face, wide jaw. The rounded shape of his eyes, though, Feather's were a watery shade of blue-green while Golden's were...well, golden. Golden. I hadn't thought about him in a long time. That made me feel a bit guilty. He was my mate-to-be. Shouldn't I be worrying about him? He'd saved my life and told me to run, well wasn't that worth a few thoughts!? I pushed those thoughts away and concentrated on Feather.

"I'm SO glad you're all right Feather. I really, REALLY am. Now you've got to promise NEVER to do something stupid like that again."

"If I hadn't, you'd be dead, and then where would I be? Don't you remember what I said when I was a cub? I STILL don't know what I'd do with out you."

"Feather, you haven't seen me since you were a cub." I laughed.

"My point exactly. I was totally lost. Now I'm found. I'm gonna protect you from who, or what ever tries to hurt you. I promise...mom."

I wondered if all mothers were this close to their cubs. I mean, my mother had practically disowned me when I was small. Golden seemed close to his mother, but not like this. I saw a deep loyalty in Feather's eyes. As I looked into them I could see the tiny cub he'd been in the pride. I remembered him being born. I remembered when he'd been the only thing in the world that had kept me going when I was a loner in the savannah. My vow to protect him, and now he was making the same promise. Right back at me.

I tearfully nuzzled him again.

Dapple had walked over, Chase behind her, skittishly looking around.

"Hey Feath, forgetting something?" She asked coolly. She had a deep kind of voice like her mother, but less sharp. Calm and smooth.

Feather looked over at her inquisitively.

"Your brother?" She asked, leaning toward Feather encouraging him to finish the thought.

His eyes lit up in understanding.

"Oh YEA!" He cried suddenly, and excitedly turned to me. "Golden gave me a message fore you."

I felt my fur puff out in surprise.

“Golden!? He’s ok!? What did he say!? Tell me EVERYTHING!!”

“Ok, so Golden wants to tell you that he’s fine, and to stay put where ever you are until the first rains, and that he’ll meet you on the dog’s territory then.”

My tail flicked from side to side in excitement.

“So he’s ok!?”

“Uh...he’s all right. The dogs replaced you with him. Shadowpaws is being a freak, but Golden did manage to save Darksun’s life. She’s fine. He had to threaten to kill half of Shadowpaws’ pack before he agreed to leave Darksun alone, but he did. Some one named Blackskull is trying to work out a way to overthrow Shadowpaws, and Golden thinks that Blackskull will proably have taken over the pack by...first rain.” Feather reported seriously.

It was great to know that Golden was fine, and so was Darksun. Though, there was a hint of strain in Feather’s voice as he mentioned Darksun. I couldn’t wait until first rain. I could go to Golden. We could have a pride...have cubs, live quiet, normal lives. I could just feel it. I could picture how perfect my life with Golden would be. I only had to wait a few moon cycles, and the rain would fall, then all my dreams would come true.

Chapter Forty-Eight

About a week had passed. I’d spent almost every moment with Feather, who spent almost every moment with Dapple, who spent every moment with Chase. So we traveled around in one big group most of the time, just talking. Dapple was charming and sweet, but had a sharp edge to her like her mother. Chase still feared lions, but not Feather at all. Chase would cower away from me, retreating to walk along side Dapple or Feather. Feather treated the two cheetahs life family.

One morning I was talking to Gemma. She’d become a very good friend of mine, and was talking about all of Prix’s...Prixisnms.

“Oh, and when he smiles, he gets these dimples and-” She cut off her sentence abruptly and got a panicked look on her face. I looked around, but all I saw was Feather.

“Oh no...” she hissed, “pretend your having a really, really important conversation with me. Come on.”

I looked at her, perplexed. She put on a serious face and began seriously talking about Thunder’s condition. Feather got closer.

“Hey Gemma!” He called enthusiastically, Dapple following close behind rolled her eyes.

Gemma ground her teeth, using me as a barrier so that Feather couldn’t see her expression, then put on a very convincing smile, and looked up at him.

“Oh, hi Feather.” She greeted him stiffly.

“Hi! Say, I was wondering if you’d like me to catch you something for breakfast because we were just about to go hunting and-”

“Hey, cool, um, nice of you to offer, but...I...can’t.” She said awkwardly. Dapple was staring daggers at her.

“Oh...well that sucks...why not?”

Gemma paused.

“I was...going...to go and...um...Show Hobblestep how Thunder’s doing, because she REALLY wants to see him.” Gemma stuttered, flicking her ear at me to continue.

“Uh...yea. I want to go see Thunder...now...?” I wasn’t sure why Gemma was acting like this around Feather.

“Oh...Uh...ok. Catch you later then Gemma.” Mumbled Feather sadly, and Gemma pulled me away.

When we were out of ear shot, Gemma let out a huge sigh.

“You are a LIFE SAVER.”

“A life saver from what? What’s wrong with Feather?”

She looked down at her paws.

“He is...appreciative for my help saving his life...”

“Well wouldn’t anyone be appreciative?” I asked.

“No, I mean REALLY appreciative...in the...weird way.”

OH. She meant APPERECIATIVE. Feather had a crush on her! I couldn’t help but laugh.

“How did THAT happen? You’re a LEOPARD. You’re not even the same SPECIES.” I giggled.

Gemma frowned.

“Patients often have...feelings for their saviors. Happens a lot, but most of my patients are on their way before it bothers me. But Feather is HOUNDING me. I don’t wanna hurt the guy’s feelings but...”

I just laughed. It seemed like a serious problem to her, but I just couldn’t control myself. It sounded so ridiculous, yet she talked about it as if it were a matter of life and death.

“Hey! It’s not THAT funny! And worse, his ‘buddy’ that cheetah is all jealous. She stares at me like she wants to murder me! I just wanna yell that he’s all hers. I don’t want a LION as a mate. That’s insane!” Gemma growled, shaking her head.

Now that WAS interesting. Dapple had a crush on Feather, who had a crush on Gemma. Feather was trapped in an odd little dilemma. I could understand that Feather felt for Gemma because she had nursed him back to health, and, there was no denying that she was sort of pretty. In her own, tom-boy, leopard sort of way. But did Dapple REALLY want to be Feather’s mate? The way she had glared at Gemma when Feather had asked her to go hunting, and the way she hovered around him like a little bird, it would make sense. But it still seemed hard to believe. I wondered if Feather would ever love her back. There was no way a cheetah and a lion could ever start a pride, or mate, could there?

Suddenly we heard a sound. I flinched and my fur stood on end, but Gemma just looked calmly in the direction it had come from.

“Hey Arnos. News from your mom?” She asked the blackness.

A black leopard with dark green eyes and over sized black paws stepped out of the foliage. I’d seen him once before. Not long after I’d first arrived in the jungle.

“Yea, Starya says,” So he was Starya’s second cub. I wondered if he had any strange connections with the dead like his mother had had. I knew she had one more cub, but out of all the leopards I’d seen come and go to seek Starya or Gemma’s Healer services, I hadn’t seen another black leopard, was her last one dead?, “She says Thunder’s finally conscious again, Gemma you should probably come and help Starya, Hobblestep can come too.”

Chapter Forty-Nine

We walked over to where Thunder and Sarya were. Thunder was lying down still, but his head was up. He looked fine, tired, but fine. He seemed to be recovering well. Sarya stood over him, fussing over every little thing he mentioned was wrong.

“Any sign could be a bad one.” She told him, in an almost motherly way. I smiled.

“Hey Thunder! How are you feeling?” Asked Gemma, breaking into a relaxed run and stopping beside Sarya.

“Like a tiger smashed my head into a rock. How do you EXPECT me to feel?” He growled moodily.

Gemma looked like she was about to frown, but her expression suddenly changed dramatically, and she just laughed good naturedly.

“It’s good to have you back Thunder. You know that?” She nuzzled him and he half smiled.

“It’s...good to be back.” He answered quietly.

They seemed to be having a rather personal moment. Friends greeting each other. I didn’t think I should intrude. After all, I wasn’t his FRIEND. I was just some lioness Sarya had forced him to look over, and he’d almost been killed as a result of. I hung back instead of joining the Healers in speaking to him.

Sarya’s son Arnos surprised me when he walked up beside me.

“Why don’t you go say hi to Thunder?” He asked in a low, quiet voice. I looked over at his gentle dark green gaze.

“I don’t know...I don’t want to ruin this for him or Gemma. Besides, I don’t think he’d want to see the lioness that did this to him...” I mumbled.

“You might be surprised.”

“Why is that?”

“When he was unconscious, he kept on calling the name, ‘Storm’. Isn’t that what you said he thought your new name should be?”

I gave a surprised little squeak.

“Really?”

Arnos nodded, smiling slightly.

“Go and say hello.” He said gently. He reminded me of his dead sister Meeka, in his gentle and sweet mannerisms.

“Um...ok.” I stumbled over to Thunder who was now sitting up and in conversation with Gemma. He cut off speaking in mid sentence when he saw me and looked away embarrassedly. Gemma looked confused for a moment, then looked over and saw me, which just made her look more confused.

Arnos must have been wrong. Thunder wasn't exactly giving me a warm welcome.

“Hi Thunder...good to see you're awake.” I said awkwardly, my tail flicking from side to side with nervousness.

“Yup.” He mumbled.

There was a long, awkward silence. I slid my claws in and out of the ground to try to distract myself from the fact that I'd just broken up a perfectly nice conversation for... this.

“Well! I'M going hunting.” Said Gemma cheerfully, “Starya, Arnos, you two are coming with me.”

“Wha-” Arnos began.

“Coming HUNTING.” Hissed Gemma through a closed jaw, motioning toward Thunder and I.

I rolled my eyes, so did Thunder.

“Oh...right. Hunting, bye.” He followed Gemma and Starya away, leaving just Thunder and I alone.

There was a long silence, Thunder just stared at his paws which sat in front of him.

“Ok, Thunder, I know, you're mad at me for causing you to be in danger...but I'm really, REALLY sorry! Ok? I mean, it's not my fault he came out of no where, and no one TOLD you to attack him and-”

“Starya told me that you saved my life after Shakaar smashed my head into that rock... that you kept me awake as long as you could, and then put that...stuff...on, that I would

have died with out you....is that true?" Thunder cut of my ramblings, still staring at his tan paws.

"Um...I...I guess so..." I answered confusedly.

He looked up at me, his amber eyes clear. He let a genuine smile spread across his dark golden face. It was the first real, true, smile that I'd seen him make since I met him.

"Then I owe you," His smile grew wider, "Storm."

I smiled back shyly at him.

"No...you don't really owe me...I mean...you've saved my life twice. I'm still not even."

"Ah," He said standing up, "We'll have to fix that."

"How?" I grinned.

"Oh, I'll just have to almost die some more times before you go. It'll all even out," He yawned, then his eyes lit up with an idea, "Hey, have you seen the jungle?" He asked.

I looked around.

"Well I'm STANDING in it. So...yes...?"

He beamed.

"You haven't seen it. As pay back for one of the times I saved your life, I invite you on a tour, then we'll be even."

"Shouldn't I owe YOU for a tour?" I asked smiling amusedly.

"I won't tell who ever's keeping score if you don't."

I laughed.

"But...Shouldn't you stay here? Gemma will have a fit if you leave, and Starya will be worried."

"I feel FINE. It's not gonna hurt anybody if I take a day off being their patient. Come on!"

He galloped a few steps forward and motioned for me to follow. I did.

We ran through the jungle. He stopped at a thick tree.

It was gigantic, with a wide trunk, and many branches sticking out, some even near my eye level, each thick and covered in soft looking moss. I could see claw marks etched into the lower branches. Thunder looked up at it. Suddenly, he leapt up into it, landing perfectly balanced on a low branch, he skillfully climbed up to a higher one and grinned down at me.

“Raised by leopards. Comes in handy.”

“Well...what’s the point of being up there?” I called up.

“It’s where I sleep. You can share it if you want, I’m pretty sure it’s the easiest tree in the jungle to climb, and one of the only ones that has thick enough branches to hold a lion.”

I took a step back.

“Are you crazy?! I can’t get up a TREE! MAYBE if I had four legs to use, but I only have three. There is no WAY I could get up there.”

He shot down the tree, and was on the ground beside me before I knew it.

“It’s not that hard. You don’t have to jump into it like I do. You can sort of...flop on.”

He showed me how, by standing on his hind legs and dragging his lower body up by draping his forepaws over the tree, digging his claws into the branch, and hoisting himself up.

“See?” he hopped to a higher branch, “Come on, you try.”

I tried. A few times, but eventually I did get up to the first branch.

“See. You’re getting the hang of it!” He told me encouragingly.

I practiced getting up a few times, until I was more confident about myself. Of course, I couldn’t confidently stride along the branches of the tree like Thunder could, and certainly not run and walk along them like the leopards, but I could get up on the first and second branches. That was getting somewhere. Now I had a set place to sleep. It made the jungle feel more like a home, rather than just somewhere I was staying. That was a stage the dog pack had never gotten to.

Once I was confident about my ability to get up to a high branch, laced with enough moss to sit comfortably on, Thunder jumped down out of the tree.

“All right good. We have a tour to see to. Come on.” He began to walk, and I stumbled clumsily out of the tree that we now shared and tumbled after him.

We spent the afternoon touring around the huge jungle, he was so different than before. He was friendly and charming. With no sarcasm, or cruel humor. Just...I don't know. Nice. And he kept on calling me Storm. I liked the name. For some reason it felt...right. I felt like that name was me. Hobblestep was the name my mother had chosen for me, and though it was what I'd always been called, it never felt like MY name. Storm, it felt right when he spoke to me with it. I decided that I would leave the name Hobblestep behind, along with the unhappy lion that went with it. From now on I was Storm.

Night was falling.

“Thunder, you should be getting back to Starya and Gemma. They will be worried SICK.” I told him, reluctantly. I'd been meaning to tell him for a long time, but I had been enjoying myself so much that I didn't want to. But now, as the shadows grew longer, and blended into the darkness that was steadily eating at the scenery, I knew he should go back.

“Wait, I want to show you just one more thing.” He said, smiling like an excited cub.

“Oh...all right.” I smiled and followed him even deeper into the forest.

As we walked I began to hear a faint hissing noise.

“What's that?” I asked.

“You'll see.” His smile grew wider as he pushed his way through the thick foliage, bright greens turned almost black in the darkness of night.

The hissing noise grew into a roar. Thunder disappeared into a thicket of bushes. I followed and gasped at what lay behind it. My fur stood on end in fear, and excitement.

Before us was water cascading over a cliff and into a huge body of water, I could see elephants and hippos wading in the water below. I looked over the cliff, the spray from the waterfall slightly wetting my fur. Everything spread before me. The jungle, the border from the green forestry and the golden savannah. The moon smiled down at me, soaking my fur in its warm glow. I had been cut off from this sky, so full of glittering stars, and the moon's smiling face. I stood at the edge of the cliff and let the wind blow through my fur, I closed my eyes and imagined I could fly. I felt like I could just grow wings and soar

over this place. I felt so peaceful, so at home. The roaring of the moving water filled my ears, but sounded like the world was singing to me.

“Thunder what IS this place?” I asked, still staring over the jungle.

“It’s called Sky Falls. It’s a waterfall, you can see the whole jungle, and the sky. I...uh...I thought you’d like it.”

“I don’t like it, I LOVE it! Oh, it’s BEAUTIFUL!” I nuzzled him gratefully, “Thank you so much for bringing me here.” I sighed happily. He sighed too.

We stayed like that for a moment, just listening to the falls, and looking at the moon-light bathed jungle and savannah. The moment was so perfect...too perfect.

Wait a minute, what was I DOING? I had a mate-to-be! Was I really sitting here nuzzling another male!? But...Thunder I were just friends....right?

I abruptly pulled away from him.

“You really should be getting back.” I said hurriedly.

“Um...yea. I should. Thanks for taking the tour, Storm. Now we’re even. Feel free to use the tree.” He looked a little bit embarrassed, then walked back to where he was supposed to have stayed all day. I sighed at the wonderful view again, but somehow, it didn’t seem half as beautiful with out Thunder there beside me. I shook my head out and trotted to the tree Thunder would be sharing with me once he was fully healed to get some rest.

Chapter Fifty

My eyes felt sticky with sleep, and kept closing every time I opened them. I felt a weight on my side and heard snoring in my ear. I moved my eyes but not my face since it was squished between the earthy smelling moss on the tree branch, and Thunder’s cheek. He was snoring loudly, his mouth open. His upper body had slumped out of his branch, and now his forepaws and sleeping face were draped over me.

His mouth was moving slightly. He was mumbling half formed dreams. I wiggled under his weight.

“Stay on your own branch, you big lump!” I growled playfully, gently placing the fluffy end of my tail on his nose. Immediately, his eyes flew open, he flinched, and lost his balance, shaking the whole tree as he fell out of it.

I laughed as he hit the ground and looked up at me, frowning.

“Thanks. Thanks for that.” He growled sarcastically.

I just laughed again.

“I wasn’t trying to knock you off! But you were sleeping on me...” I couldn’t stop laughing as he frowned up at me, with mock dissatisfaction. The fall hadn’t been very far. Not far enough to injure him anyway.

“I don’t know what POSSESSED me to let you share my tree anyway, Storm.”

I hopped out of the tree.

“Oh, it must be my IRRESISTIBLE charm!” I giggled sarcastically, waving my tail. He chuckled.

“Must be.”

I smelled Feather approaching. I turned just in time to hear him calling me.

“Hey Storm! Hunting?” He asked, followed as always, by the cheetahs Dapple and Chase – Shimmers cubs.

“You’re not going out to explore today?”

“Maybe later, but I haven’t been out hunting with you for AGES.”

“All right. Lead the way!” I followed Feather, and turned back to Thunder for a moment, “See you later Thunder!”

“Yea, yea...” He muttered, “I’ll be down by the water hole at Sky Falls if you need me, have fun.” With that, Thunder shook the leaves out of his mane and walked towards the base of the massive falls.

I followed Feather and the Cheetahs.

A month had passed since my tour with Thunder. Dry Season was long this year, and first rain still hadn’t come. Almost every day, Feather went out with the cheetahs to explore every part of the jungle, and maybe find Argon, the lion whom I was supposed to meet before we were attacked by the tiger Shakaar. I didn’t search myself because it would be slow going with my crippled leg, so Feather had taken up the task, bright eyed and bushy tailed.

In his travels he met leopards and other creatures of all sorts, which, him being Feather, he befriended.

With Feather and the cheetahs out exploring, and Sarya and Gemma healing those who needed it, that left a lot of time for Thunder and me to be alone.

Surprisingly, instead of getting sick of each other like I was certain we would, or having more of those awkward moments like the one when we first visited Sky Falls, all that happened was we became very best friends. I was closer to Thunder now than I'd been even to Hover. I felt like I could tell him anything. Sometimes we'd spend afternoons just talking about ourselves, and our pasts. He knew my entire life's story right up till I met him. About my cub-hood, my mother, Hover, Golden, the dogs, Shimmer, everything! And hadn't seemed bored at all when I'd told him.

And I knew his history, at least...what he remembered of it.

Apparently he lost all his memories when he was in adolescence. He was about how old Feather had been when I was captured by dogs. Not full grown, and with only scraps of mane. He remembered nothing from before that. He had woken up in the jungle one day without a clue as to who he was, or what had happened to him. He had almost starved, until Sarya had found him, and added him to her 'collection' as he called it. At the same time she was raising her own 3 cubs, and Gemma, who had been disowned by her own mother for being too scrawny. She had also practically raised Prix, who kept on sneaking away from his litter to see Meeka.

He said he'd lived pretty much like a leopard. He'd never even met another lion other than Ghost until I came, which was why he was so curious about me when I'd first arrived. And he'd acted rude because he was...I don't know. He had sort of evaded that, he seemed like he wanted to say afraid of me somehow, but that would damage his pride.

After hunting with Feather, I caught up with Thunder at the water hole.

In the jungle, there were two bodies of water that we went to the most. There was the spring, which was little more than a deep puddle, but was always a good source of fresh water, and no animals lived in it. Nothing but the weeds.

And then there was the water hole. A huge body of water, that broke off into a river, which grew thinner and thinner, until when it was out in the savannah it was just a dry river BED. But here, at the base of the river, it was huge and deep. Elephants usually waded in there, along with other jungle animals, and sometimes savannah creatures desperate enough to venture into this strange place.

I found Thunder at the edge of the water hole, grinning a sharp toothed grin. I came up beside him.

“What’s going on Thunder?” I asked, sliding into a crouch beside him.

“Look what just moved into the water hole.” He hissed mischievously.

I looked over. To my surprise, I saw several plump purple creatures sitting in the water. Rolls of fat covered their stout bodies, though we could only see their heads and a bit of their backs, I knew what their bodies looked like all ready.

“Hippos!?” I asked in astonishment.

It was rare for hippos to travel. Most of them stayed in the water hole they were born in for their whole lives, but these one seemed to have just moved in. Dry Season must really being horrible out in the savannah this year. If the hippos didn’t have enough water, and were forced to move into places like this, I shuddered to think what was happening to the other creatures.

“Yea, Hippos.” Thunder’s tail flicked from side to side in excitement, “Ever been hippo hunting?”

I stared at him.

“Hippos can snap you in half with one BITE! Who would be crazy enough to go HIPPO HUNTING!?”

He gave me a side long glance.

“You and I perhaps?”

I was about to point out all the reasons why that would be the stupidest thing either of us could possibly do, when Thunder suddenly went rigid.

“Did you hear that?” He hissed, his muscles tense.

“Hear what?” I asked quizzically, I hadn’t heard a thing.

“Pawsteps. Looks like hippos aren’t the only ones moving in. Come on, they came from over there, you circle from the right, and I’ll go from the left.” He whispered, motioning for me to get up.

I did, and I walked to my right, my ears pricked for sound. As we rounded a thick patch of foliage, I went down on my belly stealthily, and looked at the intruder. I couldn't see their face, and they were up wind from me, so I couldn't catch their scent. But I could tell it was a dark tan lioness. Suddenly, Thunder leapt out of the bushes at her, she made a terrified yelp and ran the other way – towards me. I instinctively jumped out of the bushes and landed squarely on her shoulders, she crashed to the ground under my weight, and I quickly rolled her over so that I could see her face. She had a worn looking face. Her grey-blue eyes were dull and seemed tired. She had a long scar from below her left eye to her lower right cheek.

“Why are you here, in this jungle?” I snarled down at her.

She looked turned her face to look me in the eye, she seemed like she was going to snarl something unkind at me, but her expression suddenly and dramatically changed to one of awe. She quickly pulled herself together and said, “What, I’ve been gone more than half your life and you don’t remember me? It’s me! It’s Hover.”

Chapter Fifty-One

I couldn't hide the complete and utter shock that crossed my face. Hover used the momentary lapse in my concentration to hastily slide out of my grasp.

“You’re getting pretty good at that Hobbs. You gave me a pretty big scare there, when’d you get so good at fighting?” She said, sitting down in front of me and licking her forepaw.

When I didn't answer she looked straight at me, her pale blue eyes probing me.

“Hobbs?”

I looked back at her blankly. The scar was plain on her once pretty face, there were also rips in her ears where the impala teeth had once been pierced. Even so, she was still pretty. Prettier than I'd ever be. Better than me. I felt sort of...hollow. When I used to muse about ever seeing my former best friend, I'd always imagined myself being overjoyed. Which I should be. Right? My stomach twisted with something that was the opposite of friendliness.

This was the lion who had abandoned me out of the blue, to go elephant hunting with a lioness who had bullied me my entire life. This was the lion who had stopped talking to me after SHE'D abandoned me, and acted like everything was my fault. This was the lioness who hadn't even turned to glance back at me as I was sentenced to what I'm sure

the entire pride thought would be death. Cold rage bubbled inside of me. She was looking at me like I was her FRIEND.

What did she think I was? Her little toy? The sad part is, if this had happened in the pride, I would have been relieved that she wanted to be friends again. I would have happily followed her around like I always had. Like a buzzard on a rhino's back. I didn't need to cling on to someone anymore. I didn't need to let them steer where I was going, like those little birds do. I was NOT the weak lion I once was, I was NOT Hobblestep, and never wanted to be again. I was Storm. Storm could hunt for herself, Storm had friends who would not abandon her at a moment's notice – Thunder, Gemma, Prix, Feather, and others who I shared the jungle with – Storm felt good about herself, and she wasn't going ANYWHERE.

But here was Hover. Calling me by Hobblestep's name. Treating me as she had treated me before...what if I fell back into the gaping hole that the name represented because of her? I would never let that happen. I didn't need Hover. I didn't even want her.

After a pause, I looked right into Hover's eyes.

"That's not my name." I growled.

She gave me an odd look.

"Do I have you mixed up with some other lioness with the same scars, voice and eyes that is shocked to see someone they have apparently never met? Psh. Come on Hobbs. Aren't you happy to see me?" There was something strained about the cheerful tone she used. It was empty. That wasn't Hover like.

My mind began to waver. Back to the 'how can you be so cold with your best friend?' to which I promptly reply to myself that 'She isn't my friend anymore. She abandoned me a very long time ago'.

"My name is Storm, and this isn't your jungle. Get out." I snarled, trying to keep the hard mask I wore tight and not let any emotion shine through.

"What!? Hobbs – er..Strom – why? I JUST got here!" Her words held slight pleading, but in her eyes was something deeper, something more urgent and desperate.

Thunder walked out from his cover in the bushes to stand beside me. He must have noticed that I had begun to shiver. I didn't know what to do. I didn't WANT to let Hover back into my life...but...I felt horrible forcing her to leave. She was Hover after all, and no matter what she'd done to me...I'd always be loyal to her...even if I didn't want to be.

“Look, who ever you are, haven’t you heard of the ‘Place Of Shadows’? Cursed? Evil? Spirit infested, what ever else you want to throw in? Well you’re standing in it.” He told her. Many times we’d informed lost lions that this was indeed The Place Of Shadows, and they had run out of here like they were being chased. It made me giggle every time. But Hover just stood there, and glared at him.

“Who invited you?” she growled at him, her scar making her look more threatening. He glared right back.

“It’s MY jungle.”

“Oh, sorry, I must have over looked all the multiple scent markings, and that huge pride you must lead, oh, and those pesky leopards must just be squatters that you haven’t chased out of YOUR jungle yet.” She snarled.

It was a valid argument, Thunder never scent marked. And in order for a lion to actually ‘own’ land they had to have a pride...which Thunder was without, and they also weren’t supposed to share their territory with anyone but their pride. He gritted his teeth at her.

“That’s what I thought. This jungle is one big free for all. Now, wanna scoot shortie? I’ve gotta talk to my best friend.” She said coolly, licking her other paw.

Thunder snarled. He wasn’t very big. If it weren’t for his mane, Hover would be larger than him. I was unusually small for a lioness and was probably one of the few that was smaller than him and full grown.

“He doesn’t have to go anywhere Hover. He’s my friend, and in case you didn’t notice, you haven’t been, for almost the entire Dry Season. I don’t want you here.” I hissed, jumping to Thunder’s defense.

For a moment, all her relaxed, cool, Hoverisms dropped away. She looked like a lost cub. She looked hurt and forlorn. Like I’d just betrayed her in the worst way possible. What I said had been harsh, but I had never known Hover to just drop her oblivious attitude. Not even when she had been telling me about her planned suicide when I’d first met her had she looked this lost, this alone. Even Thunder looked surprised at her total change of emotions. All I wanted to do now was comfort her.

“Please...Hobbs....Storm...what ever you want to be called...I...I don’t know where else to go...” She whispered. How had she snapped this fast from insulting Thunder to on the verge of tears. TEARS! This was Hover! Crying? Something had happened to her out in the savannah. Something horrible. I couldn’t send her back out there.

I sighed.

“All right...come on Hover...lets go...” I mumbled. She paused, a strange, sad look on her face.

“What?” I asked.

“It’s....it’s nothing. I just...I...no one’s called me by that name for a...a really long time now...” She murmured half to herself, sniffing.

Chapter Fifty-Two

We walked in awkward silence. Hover looked around worriedly at the massive jungle trees that loomed over us. I remembered the way they had unnerved me when I’d first arrived, blocking out the sun I’d come to know so well. The sun I’d come to despise as it beat down on my back, and sucked out the little energy I had, drank up the water I needed so badly to survive. How it made the soil cry out in despair, cracked and parched under one’s paws. Why had I felt so empty without its constant bright smirk watching my every move? Without it’s ever-present fingers wreathing around in my fur and heating my body to the point of utter agony.

It contrasted so greatly with the cool air I now let seep into my lungs. The trees and their mighty branches shielding me from the sun’s gaze. It wasn’t watching me any more. It wasn’t harming me. The soil I walked upon now was soft, and cool to the touch. It was covered in life, mosses and fallen leaves and tender saplings that would one day grow into the enormous trees that surrounded us. Was it the lack of sun that made this place so peaceful? After the attack from the tiger “Shakaar”, my life had been almost...well... perfect. No more depression, no more feeling useless or hopeless or...like a cripple. I felt free here. Freer than I had ever felt in the open savannah.

Maybe that was why I felt so cold toward Hover. Perhaps to me, she represented everything I was aiming to forget. Which, of course was silly. When first rain hit, I would be going back out there. Leaving the jungle that I had come to love so much, to be with my true love. Golden. Picturing his muscular body, his broad face, his slightly wide set golden eyes warmed my heart. I tried to remember the sound of his flawless voice. I tried to remember how it sounded when he said he loved me...I found that I couldn’t. No matter. I’d be with him soon enough. I’d have the rest of my life to memorize the way his voice sounded, and the way it felt when he made my whole body tingle with just one stunningly handsome glance. What ever the sun, or the savannah could throw at me it didn’t matter as long as I had him. A tiny smile at his memory danced across my muzzle. Thunder noticed.

“Warming up to the thought of having an old friend around?” He asked curiously.

His question startled me. I looked from Hover to him, back at Hover, then more slowly, let my gaze drift to the trees.

“Nah. She isn’t really a friend anyway...” I felt my throat tighten at the lie. Well, I mean, I didn’t want it to be a lie. I really didn’t have any desire to be friends with her. But some, deep, Hobblestep tie inside me was still stubbornly attached to that nuisance of a lion.

His dark amber eyes probed me.

“SHE certainly seems to think of you as a friend. Best friend if I heard her right.” He stated casually, watching me closely for a reaction.

“That’s because SHE doesn’t understand that you don’t just forgive someone who treated you like nothing for absolutely no good reason.” I snarled hastily, I didn’t want to take out my anger for Hover on Thunder. He didn’t deserve that. Through the corner of my eye I saw Hover stiffen, then loosen up again quickly, but this time abandoning her obviously fake cheerfulness to look rather grimly ahead of her. I repressed an obnoxious smirk that threatened to cross my face. Let her feel bad. See if I cared. She didn’t care when she’d caused my depression, why should I care about hers?

Thunder looked at me, his face creased with disapproval.

“Storm, I’ve never known you to be this...this CRUEL to anyone! I mean, YOU know what it’s like to have friends reject you, you’ve told me so, so why would you ever do it to someone else?” He exclaimed in dismay, apparently I hadn’t been able to suppress that smirk after all.

“When did you become the adult?” I hissed hotly, before he could reply, Prix’s energetic self dropped out of a tree in front of us.

“Now, now kids. Play nice. Claws in now.” He teased, “I’LL be the adult here thank you very much.” He stepped between us, his bright orange eyes dancing with laughter on his pure black face as he slid his slender golden, body between us.

“I came to tell you that – ” his eyes found Hover, who had adopted a meek posture and was half hidden between Thunder and I. Why was she acting like such a herd-less gazelle? She was Hover for Savannah’s sake! Since when did she become such a...a... weakling?

“Well, well. Seems I’ve come all this way for nothing! You guys found her before I could even find you! Wow, do you lions grow, like, wings and fly around looking for each other

or something!? How did you get to her, and start bringing her back before I could tell anyone I'd found her!?" Prix cried.

I laughed at his sincerely amazed expression.

"It was just by accident Prix." I giggled.

"Oh SURE it is. It was uncanny how Thunder found you and that dead lioness you were carrying before I did and had to tell ME there were new comers in the jungle. Accidents don't exist! It was either fate, or wings." He eyed all three of us lions, "and I'm not putting my prey on fate."

Thunder and I laughed, light heartedly. It was uncanny how Prix could turn a possible fight into a laugh. He was one of my best friends here in the jungle, and my very favorite of all the leopards. Prix turned his attention to Hover now.

"So what's your name?"

Hover, who I had almost forgotten was there, straightened.

"I am Swift- um...Hover." She looked down at her paws embarrassedly. "I'm Hover." She repeated.

"Nice name. I like that name. See, Cynthia here had a horrible name to start with, and couldn't even be bother to change it to a GOOD name. I mean, geeze. It was bad enough having one outcome of rain around, now we have TWO." Prix looked accusingly at Thunder for his name.

Hover looked confused.

"Who's Cynthia?"

"Her." He flicked his black tipped tail at me.

Hover gave him an unamused look. The Hover I knew laughed at anything. Even if it wasn't funny. She hadn't laughed once all the time Prix was here. She looked like Hover, but this was not Hover. She was like a melon that the monkeys of the jungle had scraped all the insides out of. Still technically a melon, but everything that had made it one was eaten away, scraped off until all that was left was a shell that deceived those who only looked at it into thinking it was still full. The question was, who had scraped away what Hover had been? And would she ever get it back?

I slowly began to let go of my lasting negative feelings about Hover as I watched her talk to Prix, covering the pain that I could see deep in her pale blue eyes with empty smile after empty smile. With hollow laugh after hollow laugh. I could tell she didn't really want to be talking to anyone. I could tell she wanted to curl up and never move again, it was the look I could feel on my own face so many times when I'd lived out in the savannah reflected on someone else's face. It was painful to watch this. I had no choice anymore, really. I had to talk to Hover, I had to find out what happened, and I HAD to do what I could to heal her. My eyes suddenly let the fog I'd forced over them lift and I could see and feel clearly about Hover again. I owed her so much, even if she had abandoned me, she had provided me with hope, with a friend, my very first true friend. That was a debt I could never repay.

Chapter Fifty-Three

As the sun sank into the horizon, sending its last orange rays of light through the thick canopy, we finally reach the tree Thunder and I shared. I invited Hover to come up, but she said she'd sleep on the ground. In the savannah that was fine, but here the soil was always damp, and would wet anyone's under belly who tried to sleep there. I'd tried to be friendly, as an apology for my earlier behavior, but she kept on asking like her tail was tied to a dead wildebeest and would never meet my gaze, and just keep moving slowly.

I slept in the tree beside Thunder. But it wasn't restful. I after what couldn't be more than a few hours, I woke up. I slid out of the tree, aware of Thunder's loud snoring. Though, I couldn't bring myself to smile at it as I usually did. I was too distracted with Hover. I jumped down and called her softly. I wanted to talk to her now. I couldn't leave it for another second. The haunting pain on my friends face was there every time I closed my eyes and I had to know why it was there, and who was to blame.

I looked around the dim jungle, it was as clear as day to my eyes, but instead of greens and browns, everything was made up of varying shades of blues and greys at night. Hover was no where to be seen.

"Hover?" I called, careful not to wake Thunder. No response. I went to take a closer look at the bent grasses where she'd lay. I found a clear path of indented grass and broken branches of bushes leading away. Hover was new in the jungle still moved clumsily through the terrain. I followed it curiously. After several minutes of easy tracking I found her. Her tail was curled up over her pale tan paws. Her head hung low.

She was standing on a cliff, near Sky Falls, but far enough away that the thundering sound of the falls didn't reach this place. It was perfectly silent aside from the soft cooing of night birds and the soothing song of crickets and other insects. The occasional high

pitched croak of a frog as well, but that was all. I stepped silently closer. Hover was whispering something tearfully.

“Mud...please...if you can hear me...I...I love you Mud. I didn’t mean for it to happen...any of it.” Her clear voice suddenly broke into un even sobs, but she kept on speaking to the night, looking over the cliff, “I hope that there is somewhere we go when we die. I hope that one day...that one day I’ll get to know you. You were taken from me so soon...and the others...” Her speaking faded into incoherent sobs and her body shook.

My ears flattened to my head in dismay.

“Hover?” I called into the darkness. She didn’t turn around at first. I walked closer to her. She still didn’t move. Just went on sobbing. I walked right up beside her and sat down.

“Hover what is it? Who’s Mud?” I asked gently.

She slowly turned her head to me. I flinched slightly at the sight of the deep scar on her face.

“You mean who WAS Mud...” She whispered.

I stroked her back soothingly with my tail.

“Who was he?”

She opened her mouth as if she wanted to answer, but only began to sob again.

I nuzzled her chest encouragingly.

“Come on Hover. You can tell me anything...I’m....I’m your best friend, remember?”

She looked over at me, her eyes red and wet from crying. She took a deep breath the steady herself.

“You are. You don’t know how much having you as a friend means to me now...” She whispered, “I didn’t know how much you meant to me until...until you were gone...”

“Well I’m back with you now. That’s what matters right?”

She nodded slowly, looking away.

“Hover please. I need to know what’s wrong. I want to help you. I really, really do. Please Hover, tell me.”

She sighed.

“A-all right...” And began.

It was true that Hover hadn't watched me go. After my mother's cub-swollen belly was torn open she had shut her eyes and not wanted to open them again. My mother had been like a mother to her. She had treated her like family. Ironically, she seemed to have treated Hover more like a daughter than, oh, I don't know, HER REAL DAUGHTER. When Hover had told me all about how my mother had treated her like her own cub, I'd been sickened with Swiftspring's behavior. I hadn't been a good enough daughter, so she'd gone and gotten a new one, a better one. I can't say I felt as sorry as one should about their mother that she was dead.

After Hover had left my company, her new best friend had been Stealthspeed, or as she used to call her – and what I personally liked better – Wildebeest-breath. Stealthspeed had told her just to keep her head down, and try to get used to the new mane. That it was how prides worked. Apparently, the little rat of a lion hadn't show even a single drop of sadness for her father, Quickmane's death at the paws of this 'new mane'. In fact, Stealthspeed had been the first to volunteer to bear his cubs. This lion had killed her own father and she'd gone and let him give her cubs?? What kind of lioness WAS Stealthspeed? I'd known she was spoiled, and self-centered, but that she would do something like that...it was beyond me. She had urged Hover to have his cubs too, but to her credit, she had refused. At first.

For some reason, Proudmane had taken a liking to Hover. He told her that he thought she was beautiful, the way she moved, the way she wouldn't yield to anyone, her face, her slender attractive body. He had charmed her, led her into his trap. With his apparently handsome dark yellow eyes, always sweeping over her like she was the queen of the world. His cunning intelligence astounding her and intriguing her. Always complementing her, always with her. Much to Stealthspeed's displeasure, Hover become Proudmane's very favorite lioness. He always gave her first bite in kills, and was never rude to her. He even told her, that he loved her, and the other lionesses were only there to give him cubs, but she was the only one he truly cared about. And she loved him. She had finally allowed him to give her cubs. Her first time, she had only one cub.

A female. She was small, even for a new born, but Hover had loved her all the same. Proudmane had showed been slightly displeased with the puny size of Hover's first cub, and she promised her, 'love' that she would do better next time. She hadn't even thought there would be a next time before she'd seen that look in his eyes. He impregnated her again as soon as she was again ready.

By this time, Stealthspeed's cubs had grown up. Two of them were male. And they had their eyes on Hover. Hover, having no idea about their real intentions, befriended them. But Proudmane suspected that they weren't aiming for a simple friendship with her. One day, when her belly was still swollen with cubs, he found her alone with his two sons, doing nothing but innocently talking, but he was so suspicious of his sons that he attacked them both, and sent them running from the pride. He then attacked Hover, accusing her of fancying his sons over himself, she had honestly protested, but he beat her anyway. The next day two lionesses found her only cub, dead in the open savannah. They said it died of the cold, apparently the lioness who was supposed to be guarding it, 'fell asleep' and the cub 'wandered off'. But Hover knew that Proudmane had probably taken the cub from the lioness, and, knowing she was too small to keep herself warm through a chilly African night, left it there. It was his twisted punishment on top of beating Hover for being around other males. But she...deceived herself into thinking that she still loved him. Her new litter of cubs were still born – all three of them. Likely because of the stress of her beating so near to their birth.

And by the look in his eyes, she knew that she had to try again. The next time she had 2, regular sized, healthy cubs. But every time she did something that Proudmane may conceive as betraying his trust in her faithfulness, a cub would 'mysteriously die'. But she couldn't bring herself to leave the pride. She couldn't bring herself to believe that the one she thought she loved was clearly insane. So she tried yet again. This time she had 3 cubs, all three healthy. She had been extremely careful not to offend him in anyway. She hardly left his side in case he thought anything she did was a betrayal. She kept these three long enough to name them, Mud, Stream and a female.

They even lasted long enough to learn to speak. One of them, Mud, he was a pure brown cub, with chubby white paws, he was the sweetest cub she had ever met. He had her pale blue eyes and looked at her earnestly through them. Every day he would happily chatter about things like butterflies, and how funny the grass looked, and everything about the world, for it was so new to him. And she decided that she could not, not EVER let Proudmane take him away from her. No matter how hard she tried, some small thing she did was bound to anger Proudmane, it always did, he regularly beat her. She had even stopped caring about her self being beaten, her own pain, she just wanted her cubs to stay safe. So she planned to find a passing loner, and beg them to take her cubs away from Proudmane's wrath. She loved those three cubs more than anything else, and even if she knew Proudmane would hunt her down if she tried to leave the pride, he wouldn't hunt them, and if she could get them safely away, that would be worth the most brutal beating from her mate.

But she had to find a rouge, which was hard to do when she could barely leave her mate's side. One day, she found some time alone when he was giving another lioness cubs, and he left her alone. She frantically began her search for a loner, and she found one. She made arrangements to get the cubs away as soon as it was possible, which turned out to

be the next morning. She thought they would get away. She really did. She thought she had done it secretly enough, that no one could see or hear her with the loner.

It's impossible to imagine her horror then, when the next day she woke to find herself nose to nose, with the severed head of her favorite cub, Mud. His big, blue earnest eyes staring terrified into nothingness. She screamed. It was full of anguish, it was full of the deepest hurt a lioness could feel. While I had been in the savannah I had felt the greatest physical pain I could feel when I was attacked by crocodiles, but Hover had suffered something that scarred much deeper than skin, she had felt the worst pain inside her that any one could feel, which, in it's ways would never truly leave her.

I didn't even dare imagine what it would have been like to have a young Feather's dead eyes staring into mine when I woke up. To have his blue-green gaze never see again...I refused to let myself pry deeper into the feeling.

She never found out what happened to Stream and the female. All she knew was that as she panted in gasps of air, staring down at the bleeding head of Mud, that Proudmane had come out of the shadows.

"Thought you could trick me did you? Thought you could go along with that loner to find a new pride, an new male? Well I won't LET you! You are MINE! Hear that Swiftbite? MINE!"

He had snarled at her, almost mockingly. She hadn't even had the strength to move, or to speak, so he had come closer and slashed her face. One claw digging deep into the flesh and leaving a very visible dip in the skin, the structure of her face that would always be there, her face bled heavily blinding her with her own red blood. He had beaten her, until she was almost dead, yelling that she was his, and no one else's. And finished, saying that she had better do better next time.

She couldn't bear to stay there, but when she tried to escape the next day – before she was even close to healing – he caught her, and beat her again. After a week, she was still no where near fully healed, but she could stand, and she tried to escape again. When he came after her, she did something that he never expected, she turned, and with one swift blow of her razor sharp claws, slashed open his throat. Killing him in his own style of murder. It was the only way to set herself free. But after all he'd done, part of her still...it still loved him. And she had never killed another lion before – why would she? A lioness's job was to hunt, not to fight. And she was sickened with herself, she was confused and didn't know what to do.

She admitted, that who entire time she was in the pride, she had barely given a second thought to me... She had come out to speak to Golden once, to tell him which direction I ran (this information was told to her by Proudmane) so that Golden would keep out of

Proudmane's fur, so she hadn't even done it for me, instead, for her... 'mate'. But as she ran from the body of her mate, the memories of her cubs, she said she felt as if she had nowhere else to go. She had to spend much time alone. She had to learn how to keep her wounds clean, and she couldn't find my trail. But she had run into Golden in the dog pack after Feather left, and he directed her to the jungle, which, apparently was surrounded by something called 'the badlands' which is the worst place to be in dry season, or wet season. I remembered to total lack of prey and predators alike when I'd come through there to the jungle.

"And when I finally got here..." Hover was whispering now, "You attacked me...and said I wasn't..." Her voice faded. The sun was starting to rise, "That I wasn't wanted..."

I silently cursed my own actions.

"Of COURSE you're wanted Hover...I was...surprised, that's all." I told her soothingly.

"Is all this my fault some how?" She asked, staring down the cliff.

"No." I answered firmly, "None of that was your fault. You were just...in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Her body shook and she began to cry again.

"Hobbs...I mean...Storm. I...I'm so glad you're here...I know I've promised this before, and I didn't keep it, but this time, I really mean it. I'll stay with you. I'll be a loyal friend. If you can forgive me for what I'd done..."

"Hover, of course I forgive you...you're my best friend. And don't worry about Mud...I'm sure...where ever he is...he's...he's happy..." I stuttered by the end, holding back my own tears for her story. But I had to be strong, for Hover's sake.

"I'm so afraid that there isn't anything after you die and...and that the last I'll ever see of Mud is that....that..." her voice trailed off as the memory of his blank blue eyes stung her and caused her to cry harder.

"You'd be surprised what happens in this jungle..." I murmured half to myself, and nuzzled her comfortingly, again.

Chapter Fifty-Four

I spent the next week just hanging around with Hover. She had gradually grown more and more like her old self, but she was still a very different lioness. For one thing, she had developed an extreme fear of male lions. That meant I didn't have much of a chance to

spend time with Thunder. He would smile and tell me she needed me more than he did, but I could see through the good natured smile there was disappointment. I'd apologized, but he told me not to because there was nothing to apologize for. Even though I'd made up with Hover, I grudgingly admitted to myself that I still felt closer to Thunder...a lot closer, and missed him.

I know, it sounds silly, I'd only known him for a few weeks...but...I felt more of a connection to him than I'd had with anyone else. It was like I'd known him my whole life. Before I met him...it's... hard to put to words...

One morning, Hover declared that she was going to attend a leopard meet. I'd been to a few of them. Every week, all the leopards in a certain area of the jungle would meet up and just talk to each other. Since they were solitary animals, they didn't have much of a chance to get news of the world outside their own territories. Thunder had thought of the idea apparently, when one of Starya's patients complained of feeling like he was always in the dark about important happenings. But, they were lots of fun to go to. Especially for someone who didn't spend much time around leopards – they were fun and quirky to talk to. She invited me to go, but I declined. She'd been slowly getting used to being around Feather and Gemma, who were both going, so I thought I'd let her spend some time with them. Being around Feather and his extremely harmless attitude might go a long way to healing her fear of male lions.

I watched her trot off more confidently than I usually saw her with Feather, Gemma, and Prix. I smiled. At the start of this week she'd been too meek to even speak a word to any of them, especially Feather, and now she was talking to them like she'd known them her whole life.

I walked up to Sky Falls. I leapt over the rushing water to a rock in the middle of the river that stood just before the edge of the falls. I sat there, the spray sprinkling on my back and just watched the sun rise. The roaring of the falls was so musical...so peaceful. I thought of First Rain. It was bound to come soon. Then I'd have to leave. I knew I'd be with Golden...but...I often had the stray thought about what it would be like to stay here. I loved it here, in the Place Of Shadows.

"Are you looking down at those hippos and just thinking... 'man, I wish I was down there hunting them'?" I heard a whisper in my ear.

I flung my head around to see Thunder sitting on the other side of the big rock. His dark brown mane billowing in the wind. He was grinning.

"Remember? My offer still stands."

"Ha! You're serious aren't you?"

He just grinned.

“Thunder that’s...that’s...it’s like suicide!!”

“I’M not scared. Come ON! It’ll be FUN!” He walked over to stand beside me, “What do you say?”

I sighed, in mock annoyance. To tell the truth, I was excited. I remembered when Hover had gone elephant hunting with Stealthspeed without me, told everyone I’d just slow them down. Well, I would show myself that I wouldn’t slow anyone down. I felt strong here. Hippo hunting. Totally irrational, and dangerous, didn’t even matter anymore.

“If I get any more scars from this, I’ll blame YOU!” I hissed playfully, then leapt off the rock and tore down the rocky path to the water hole. Thunder stumbled after me, more clumsy than me, the cripple. I laughed when I reached the edge of the water before him, and he tripped on a rock, sliding, and slipping onto the ground.

“Come on you big lump.” I teased him, nudging him up.

He shook the twigs and dirt out of his mane and narrowed his eyes, smiling mischievously at the hippos who were milling around slowly in the deep waters.

“So what you do, is you jump on the back of one of them...and try to bring it down.”

“Which is impossible.” I added.

“Which, yes, IS impossible. But hey, that’s half the fun.”

“What if you get thrown into the water and attacked?”

“You won’t.”

“Oh really?”

“Course not. You’ve got ME looking out for you.”

I laughed.

“Oh yes, and you NEVER fail.”

He elbowed me and lashed his tail.

“Ok, lets both go for...that one.” He motioned toward a big one who was standing peacefully in a patch of sunlight, near the shore.

I nodded and sped toward it. I reached the edge of the shore and wiggled my hindquarters, before leaping onto the purple-grey mass' back. It grunted in surprise and shook itself, I laughed as my little island began to shake more when Thunder got on too. The hippo began thrashing wildly, and twisting its short neck, trying to get us off, the shaking became even more violent.

“Right, time to get off. Just jump to one near by.” He called, leaping to another one.

I hopped off my shaking purple island to another, more blue one. It began to shake too, and I made a game of leaping from hippo to hippo before any of them could knock me off. My life was in danger if I fell off, but I couldn't bring myself to care! I was having too much fun! I laughed giddily. This HAD to be better than elephant hunting! This wasn't even hunting at all! This was just amusement. After a few minutes of jumping from thrashing creature to thrashing creature, something went wrong.

Thunder hopped onto a big bull hippo, and it actually thrust it's rear into the air, sending him flying. He dropped into the water, which was now alive with the waves made by displeased hippos. I gasped. He tried to swim, but swimming was not one of a lion's strong points. The big creatures surrounded him, opening their huge mouths, and showing off their massive teeth. I knew that in one snap of those deadly mouths, Thunder could be broken clean in half. Hippos may be prey, but they are not to be trifled with.

The hippo I stood on in shock began to rock wildly and I leapt off, onto another one. It began moving toward Thunder, I watched him paddle helplessly in the waters, cornered between the waterfall and the teeth of four, soon to be five counting the one I was riding on, hippos. I didn't even have a moment of doubt. With out any thought for my own safety, or even enough time to make a plan, I dove into the water. I was a strong swimmer for a lion. Maybe it's because I was used to being off balance by always holding up my paw, or maybe it was because in water I wasn't a cripple any longer, and the excitement of using all four legs made me better at swimming. I don't know. But there I swam.

I bravely swatted at any hippos that moved in to block my path. Paddling strongly, I reached Thunder, and grabbed him by the mane. Long, wet fur, got into my mouth but I swam on, slashing with all my might at the larger, threatening creatures. They were easily scared. And none of them were as angry as hippos can get. If you can swim well hippos are almost easy to get around, they aren't very energetic.

I reached the shallow waters panting, and dragged Thunder the rest of the way to the bank. He coughed up mouth fulls of water, then looked over at me, grinning sheepishly.

“Thanks, and, now we’re even.”

I panted, and coughed up a mouthful of water, then looked over at him.

“What?”

He stood up and began carefully licking the water free of his pelt and mane.

“You know...I’ve saved you twice, and just then was number two for you.”

I paused, then laughed, and couldn’t stop.

He kept grinning as I licked myself off between laughs.

“I thought you said that no one would fall off?”

“No, I said YOU wouldn’t fall off. And you didn’t. You JUMPED.” He said defensively.

I shook the remaining water out of my pelt. I saw that most of him was drying, but his mane was still soaking.

I laughed again and nuzzled his wet chin, getting my newly dried for head wet again.

“Of course I jumped in. I couldn’t just let you be torn to shreds by hippos. I would miss a golden opportunity to settle the score.” I told him sarcastically.

He laughed, and looked over at me, happiness brightening his dark amber eyes. At that moment, I considered staying in the jungle more than ever before.

Suddenly a drop of water fell on my nose. I twitched my whiskers.

“What was that?”

He looked at me quizzically.

“What was what?”

Another one fell, than another one. This time he felt it too, he flinched and twitched his whiskers as well.

“I think...I think it’s...rain.”

Chapter Fifty-Five

I jumped, literally jumped for joy. I laughed out loud and began running. Running toward the savannah. I wanted to be out of the cover of all those trees, to feel the rain on my pelt. It was a 3 hour walk to the savannah, but if I ran, I could do it in an hour. First rain would last days anyway, no reason to hurry, but I did. I wanted to be out there, and feel it. I wanted to see the wasteland that had always been my home take the first steps to becoming green, and alive.

Thunder raced after me, I was too far ahead of him to see his expression, just to note the loud thud of his paws as he ran.

After hours of non-stop running I could see the trees thinning out, giving way to very different, very familiar terrain. I sped up even more, forcing my tired muscles to keep working, and finally emerged into the wide open space that was my home.

I glanced around. It was amazing. The always-blue-sky was a thousand shades of grey now, most of them dark, moving and growling. Rain shot down. Over everything, everywhere. It came down so heavy that it was almost like a curtain. It was heavy and almost painful, the way it drummed into my hide. I laughed, and stood on my hind legs, dancing in the plentiful rain. I was soaking wet for the second time that day. I noticed Thunder wasn't out there with me. I searched around confusedly, and spotted him, standing in the shadow of the last trees of the jungle, watching me with a sad smile.

I ran back to him, tail waving in excitement, ear pricked.

"Hey, come on! It's amazing! You've gotta come out here!" I giggled, going up behind him, and pushing him.

"No." He said simply.

I pushed him harder, beaming playfully. Instead of the cheerful reaction I'd expect from him, he dug his claws into the ground, and roared, his strikingly Thunder-like roar.

"I said NO!" He bellowed.

I jumped back.

"T-Thunder...?"

"I...it's..." He began, but gave up and just snarled, walking back into the depths of the trees.

I was tempted to follow him, but wouldn't let myself. I wasn't going to let his moodiness ruin my fun, instead I tore back out into the rain, and watched, in amazement as a flash of sun-bright lightning split the air, reaching to the earth, followed by a loud clap of thunder. I sighed. It suddenly was as fun. Knowing that Thunder was angry at me. I don't really know what I DID. But...he was angry. The rain began to feel cold, and uncomfortable. I began trotting back to the jungle. I'd go find Thunder, find out what I'd done, and if it deserved an apology, give one.

"Haven't I seen you before?" I heard a sly voice ask from behind me. I pricked my ears and turned around.

Behind me was a dark tan lion, with a dark brown, almost black greasy, deformed mane. It didn't cleanly go around his face like any other lion's. It formed a long lion from his forehead to his tail, making his neck bare, and not very lion like at all. I recognized that mane. This was the lion who had killed Shimmer in cold blood. The day I'd began to hate Redband Blackrage, the day a lot of my problems in the dog pack started.

"YOU!" I roared, at full volume, and unsheathed my claws. I felt a deep, rage, the lust for Shimmer's revenge fresh inside of me. The lightning cracked the sky again, and the thunder followed, fitting for my mood.

"I'm assuming that's a yes?"

I bared my teeth in response.

"Oh, oh, oh. I KNOW you! The lioness from the dog pack, right? THAT'S where I've seen you! The scars are what did it." He told me casually.

"You MURDERED Shimmer!"

"Shimmer..shiimmmerrr...oh! The cheetah! You're STILL sulking over that thing? Dear lioness, killing cheetahs is like stepping on ANTS. It's nothing."

I roared again, and jumped at him. He easily deflected me with a swipe of his paw, and pinned me down.

"Are you REALLY stupid enough to think a crippled lioness like yourself could defeat a big strong male such as ME?"

I glared up at his smug, ugly face. I spat in his face.

He gave a mighty, oddly familiar sounding roar.

“NO ONE spits at Viraka! I think must have a death wish...” he snarled, unsheathing his claws and tearing a long bleeding line down my muzzle.

“There’s one more for the collection.” He hissed down at me. I scraped my hind legs with the claws unsheathed down his belly frantically, but he didn’t even flinch. I panicked.

“THUNDER!” I called desperately as Viraka got ready to strike another blow, this time to my neck. He froze.

“Did you say THUNDER?” He hissed down at me, his dark blue eyes intense with interest. Another lightning strike, another thunder clap.

“Y-yes.”

“I see...and what does this...Thunder look like?”

“Why should I tell YOU?” I bared my teeth at him.

“Because your puny little life is in my claws. TELL ME.”

I paused. He couldn’t do any harm to Thunder from just a description. That was assuming, he wished him harm.

“He is a dark golden lion with a brown mane.”

This sent Viraka into a fit of laughter. I frowned. He looked down at me, his big paw still rested on my chest.

“So that’s where he’s been hiding. The Place Of Shadows. Oh I should have known.”

“You...you KNOW Thunder?” I asked uncertainly. He looked down into my eyes.

“Why, of course I do. Thunder is my dear brother.”

Chapter Fifty-Six

My mind reeled.

“What?” I whispered.

“Oh yes. He and I are related. Can’t you see the family resemblance?”

I looked at Viraka more closely. I sickeningly realized that I COULD see a family resemblance. If you fixed up Viraka's deformed mane, there would be a very strong family resemblance. I shivered.

"If you think murdering a cheetah is bad, you will be appalled with my brother." Viraka leaned down so he was nose to nose with me, "My brother was a mass murderer, of LIONS."

I must have forgotten how to breath for a few seconds. The rain kept pouring down on me, I was so cold, inside and out.

"N-no..."

Viraka just nodded.

"You're lying."

"Oh, I assure you I'm not. Have you ever heard of someone called, the Shadow Killer?" He asked, stepping off me, I stood up, but didn't leave. I needed to know.

"N-no..."

"Yes you have. Every one has. He was a lion who they say 'has the blood of the innocent staining his paws'. He was a murderer, killing lionesses, and manes alike, leaving cubs to starve, alone."

I vaguely remembered a story similar to that, Powerstrike had told Spark, Fire, and I on the day Quickmane came. Just a few hours before actually. A shiver went up my spine.

"I still don't believe you."

"Just listen, and you will," and so Viraka began, "My brother, Thunder, and I were never close. He was the perfect one, I was the little screw up. First with my fighting skills, then with my bravery. He was father's joy and pride, and I was that...other son. It got much worse when my mane grew in wrong, and Thunder's grew in well. Father began ignoring me completely.

"One night, my father took Thunder out scent marking. To show him how far apart each mark should be, and what ever else a loving parent teaches their cub. I was left on the inner territory with my mother, my sister, and my aunt. I wasn't very old at the time. My mane had barely taken shape, and I wasn't even as large as a lioness. A No-Mane came. He claimed the territory as his own, even though he hadn't fought father yet. He said I

was young enough to kill – even thought I wasn’t. My mother stood up to him, she blocked his path, saying I was too old to be a cub, and that until he faced my father he had no right to even be on our territory. He killed her. On the spot. My sister came to fight by my side, and my aunt, and he killed them too. I was left there, shivering, when my father and Thunder came back. They both battled the No-Mane and killed him. But our lionesses were all ready gone. He blamed me. For being there and not protecting them. For being the reason they gave their lives. I was hardly the size of an impala when he gave me this scar on my shoulder and made me leave what was left of the pride.

“I kept a close eye on them though. I followed them, watching my father go through pride after pride, killing the manes, and leaving the lionesses defenseless. Soon he began killing the lionesses that tried to stop him, and then all of them. In cold blood. My brother, your beloved Thunder was with him the entire time and didn’t object once. He followed my father on their murderous conquest. My father was the Shadow Killer. He went on murdering, until Sunmane came and killed him.”

I stared at him,

“Just because Thunder didn’t object, doesn’t make him a killer, he probably just didn’t know what else to do...” I reasoned.

“Let me FINISH,” hissed Viraka, and continued, “The most famous stories of the Shadow Killer are those about killing entire prides, all manes, lionesses, and cubs, correct? My father didn’t do any of that. My brother, so torn by his father’s death, killed the pride he found first. Everyone. His mane wasn’t even fully grown and he had the blood of seven innocent lions on his paws. He had been rightfully my father’s crowning achievement. His power was beyond belief. But it didn’t stop there. He killed two more entire prides, then found Sunmane’s. He fatally wounded each and every member of Sunmane’s family, letting them die slowly, and painfully of blood loss. He left only one member alive. One of Sunmane’s cubs. He made the cub WATCH his family’s death. Thunder sent him to tell his Father, who was out doing something heroic...he told the cub to tell it’s father to meet him in the badlands. I couldn’t make it there to watch how it played out, I always assumed that Thunder had killed Sunmane, but been wounded and died...I never imagined my dear brother would run to the Place Of Shadows...”

I couldn’t and wouldn’t believe it.

“If you don’t think what I say is true, ask him.” Hissed Viraka. I turned toward the jungle to see Thunder standing just at the tree line, his eyes wide open in shock, and pain. I ran over to him.

“Thunder! Thunder he said horrible things about you! He said...he...” I stopped when his expression turned deadly serious.

“Thunder...?” I whispered, my breath caught in my throat, “You didn’t really...?”

Viraka was suddenly beside me.

“Tell her brother. Tell her how you enjoyed taking the lives of all those innocents. Tell her about all those deaths.”

Thunder tightened his jaw, and stared down at the ground, his mane covering his eyes, and his face.

“Thunder...Thunder no. Please...say it’s not true.” I could feel tears being to flow down my cheeks. More lightning, more thunder. My breathing came in short breaths when he didn’t move or speak. “No...”

“Storm...I...” His voice trailed off. He raised his head, his eyes were dull, and dark. They were full of anguish. They held a deep meaning, but I couldn’t tell what it was. They were bright with tears.

I was confused, I was hurt, I was terrified. A murderer. Thunder was a murder. He’d killed innocent lionesses and cubs, for no reason but pleasure. He was everything I hated in lions. Everything I despised in life. How could I consider him a friend? How could I have...have...I cut myself off there.

“Thunder...I’m going to Golden.” I told him shakily, meeting his pained amber gaze with my green one. I took in a sharp breath to get the courage to say the words I did,

“I don’t ever want to see you again.”

With that, I ran. In to the pouring rain. In to the open savannah, with out a single glance back.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

I let my aching legs take me far away before I let them rest. Not that I could sleep, with the heavy rain constantly beating down on my back, drenching me to the bone. I didn’t even have the energy to bother finding a tree, or a rock, or something to rest under. I just stopped and lay down in the open. I didn’t care anymore. My perfect little world in the jungle had just been crushed between the claws of the deformed lion. I was glad that the rain covered my tears as they ran down my face, adding to the wetness.

When ever I closed my eyes I thought of Thunder. Thunder the murderer, Thunder the liar. How could I have not seen through him? And why hadn't he said anything to me but 'Storm I' that wasn't a response! How could he answer to such horrible, horrible crimes with two words and an expression!? I was so cold. I shivered. I was shaking. I knew I really shouldn't have left. I'd left Hover, and Feather and the leopards there with out saying good bye. But...how could I have gone back in there? With HIM. Knowing what I knew. I rested my forepaw over my nose, and curled up in a tighter ball. I decided that in the morning I'd get my bearings on where I was, and go find the Pack's territory. Seeing Golden would fix anything and everything. I was sure it would.

After many attempts, I finally let my eyelids slide shut in sleep.

My eyes opened seconds later. In a surreal world. It was the savannah, but everything was off. The colours, the shapes, it all looked familiar...yet...not. I heard pawsteps from behind me on the slightly discoloured soil, I turned around to see that golden and cream lioness, who shared my appearance. I'd only seen her once before, in a dream, in the jungle. I couldn't help but gasp in amazement yet again, when I saw the striking similarity to me.

"You have failed me." She hissed.

"W-what?" I stuttered.

"Argon. You never went to him. Now you are out of the jungle and he has died. WHY wouldn't you go to him!?"

"I-I..."

"Don't give me excuses! This...this ruins EVERYTHING!" She roared, slashing the ground with thick white claws.

"Well, why didn't you tell me earlier? That was MOONS ago!" I snarled, not to be pushed around by myself.

"THEY barred me from it." Her voice was heavy with contempt.

"They?"

"The kings."

"Why aren't they barring you now...?"

“Because, you brainless little twit, you’re no longer in the jungle. You are venerable to any and all spirits.” She hissed impatiently. Was it just me, or was she a lot more pleasant last time, “I-” She began.

She was cut off by the roar of another lion. It sounded male. I saw a flash of grey run by and tear at her face, the cut bled for a minute, as the blood fell to the ground it’s colour changed, to a yellowish. She swatted the drop out of the air with her paw, and looked around, for the male who had scratched her, then disappeared.

“You have no right to be in this lioness’s mind, sister. You’re quarrel is with ME. Come and face you’re brother in honourable battle, or surrender your kingdom.” Roared the male voice, which reminded me of someone...it echoed eerily through the slightly wrong-smelling air. The golden me glanced around angrily.

“I will KILL you this time brother!” She shrieked, and ran into the distorted savannah. The savannah itself began to fade. But not into the waking world. Into the whiteness that I was used to in dreams.

I sat on my haunches, waiting. I saw a figure begin to emerge from the foggy whiteness. I stood up when I saw the pale mane, and blue eyes of MY brother, Spark.

“Sis! Sis, thank the great Savannah that you’re safe! They wouldn’t let me see you!” Cried my long dead brother, running up and nuzzling me.

“The kings wouldn’t?”

Spark nodded.

“I knew that you had to go there if you were going to stay safe for the Dry Season, but I had no idea they wouldn’t let me see you!” Spark’s voice soothed me more than anything else could have. I relaxed a little. I heard tiny footsteps. I yanked myself away from Spark, to stare wide-eyed into the foggy white. Emerging was a tiny brown cub. It still had it’s baby spots, and it walking on short chubby legs. It had blue eyes that I knew well. This must be Hover’s cub. Mud.

Mud walked up to me, huge blue eyes looked at me sadly.

“I want my mommy...” He whimpered, “Daddy told me he was going to give me a special treat that was over by the hyena lands when the nice lioness called Starry was taking Stream and my sister away. I was the only one he talked to. But when we got there...I didn’t get a special treat...”

I crouched down, so that my belly touched the smooth surface we stood upon. I looked into his big blue eyes, they reminded me so much of Hover. They were welling up with tears.

“You’re mother is ok, Mud.” I told him. Spark looked down at me, still standing. He looked puzzled, but didn’t speak.

“I never got to say goodbye...Mommy got very sad when I wasn’t there anymore. But she doesn’t know about Stream and my sister! I thought that maybe if I told her she wouldn’t be so sad...” Whispered the cub, blinking away new tears.

My eyes widened in surprise.

“Your litter mates are still alive Mud?”

The cub nodded vigorously.

“Proudmane didn’t kill them?”

“Daddy didn’t see them go. I went back looking for Mommy, because I couldn’t leave without her, but Daddy found me first...he made me tell him where they were, but he couldn’t find them. Starry is a good hider. But you HAVE to tell Mommy that she doesn’t have to be sad...they are alive...and...it didn’t hurt...”

“What didn’t hurt?”

“What Daddy did...one second I was with him, but the next second I wasn’t. I was here. And there were big scary-”

Spark shoved his paw between my face and the cub.

“That’s enough. She’ll give your message to your mother. Go now, Mud.”

Mud quivered, staring up Spark’s leg, to see his hard face. He stumbled away.

“Spark!” I cried.

“Cubs...they...I’m sorry sis...I just...I don’t like seeing them here...”

I understood. Spark had been just a cub when he had died, he probably didn’t like to be reminded about it. But, there was a slight undercurrent of deceit in his carefully calculated tone. But the white world was fading away before I could wonder what he was lying about now.

My eyes opened, only to close again, blinking away the rain, that STILL poured down like a wall. I stood up and shook out my pelt, not that it did much good, because I was just as soaked seconds later. The world was so grey...I longed for the sun. As much as I hated to admit it, the sun would have been a comfort in this never ceasing rain.

I looked around, and tried to scent through the rain. Eventually I determined which way the pack's territory lay, and walked in it's general direction. Landmarks became more and more familiar. I saw the dim outline of the pack tree in the distance. Finally! I couldn't see much around it though, the rain impaired my vision.

I walked up to the edge of the territory. I waited. No one came. In the dog pack I knew, there would be at least 5 dogs there in minutes to investigate the intruder. What was going on? I cautiously stepped over the border. Nothing. No one came. I looked around, I couldn't see any movement at all. The rain made it hard to see exactly what was around me though.

I walked until my paws hit something soft. I glanced down in horror to see that it was a body. A drenched body of a dog. It was cold, I bent down to look at it's face. It was one of Shadowpaws' top dogs. How had it been killed? The rain thinned a little, and as the scents became easier to read, I gasped. All around me was the scent of rotting flesh. I walked around the deadly silent territory. My paws ran into scraps of skin with fur on it, and chunks of dead flesh, but not many more full bodies. The rain thinned more, and I made out the shape of a body. I walked over to it, numb with dismay and horror. I could see the unsteady rise and fall of it's chest. This one was alive. The first live one I'd seen. I cautiously walked over. I recognized those markings. Dawnfire.

I was running now. She must have heard my paw steps, for she twisted her neck around, but didn't move her body. Her eyes were dull, and she smelled of death, even though she was still alive.

"Hobble...Hobblestep...?" She whispered weakly. I didn't correct her on the name, but walked up to her side, and stood in front of her.

"Y-yes...it's me." I didn't even try to hold back my tears. Dawnfire had a big scabbing wound on her swollen belly. She was pregnant, but the pups inside her were probably dead, considering how her stomach looked on the outside. A circular wound with rotting flesh surrounding it, that smelled like the rest of the dogs – dead. She was dying. The death was on her, it was just a matter of spreading. As soon as I saw her, I knew there was no way I could help her. I lay down in front of her.

"Dawnfire...what happened?"

She moved her jaws a couple of times, gathering a voice.

“The Tall Baboons came...with their sticks that sound like thunder and shoot out lightning...they came...”

The Tall Baboons. These creatures were often harmless. They often came riding on the creatures we called the Watchers, with shining furless pelts, and eyes that glowed. The Tall Baboons smelled like baboons, but had colourful pelts, that changed. They had manes, some long, some short. Most of them were harmless, but some were not. Some came with sticks of thunder and killed.

“Dawnfire...why? Why would they do this? There were more than 60 dogs in this pack! Did anyone survive??”

Dawnfire weakly shook her head.

“I don’t know...I think it was for skin. On their Watcher, there were just the skins, with no bodies, of other dogs...” Dawnfire clenched her jaws and groaned in pain, “Some may have escaped...I almost did...but they got me as I was running...I hid behind a bush, but I haven’t been able to get up...I’m dying. They got Shadowpaws...” Her voice wavered when she spoke of Shadowpaws dying, more so than for her own immanent death, “And now my pups will die...”

My whole body shook and shivered. Too much pain for such a short time! Thunder was a murderer, the entire pack was dead, Golden may be dead...how was someone supposed to just deal with this?? I couldn’t move, or speak. I just lay there, a horrible, cold numbness taking hold, because there was just too much pain to feel. I bent my head in sorrow.

“Hobblestep...I need...I need a favor...” Murmured Dawnfire. I looked up, her eyes were set on a goal.

“What do you need Dawnfire?”

“I need you to...to kill me.”

I gasped.

“Dawnfire! I won’t - ”

“Please! I know I haven’t been a friend, and I’m sorry, but I can’t live for long like this...I’m dying anyway...I just want it to end quickly...”

"I'm not going to...kill....to kill you..." I hissed, her eyes clouded with agony.

"Please! I'm in...in so much pain. I just want to die...I just want to be with Shadowpaws..."

"Dawnfire!"

"Remember that death bite you were so good at? I need you to use it..."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"Please Hobblestep. I beg you! I don't want anymore pain...I don't care if there's an after life or not...what ever death is, it must be better than...than THIS." She whimpered pathetically, "I can't even feel my back legs anymore...what good would I be to anyone even if I did survive?"

My breath came in short uneven gasps between sobs.

"Dawnfire don't do this..."

"If you are a true friend you will kill me now...I won't feel a thing."

I didn't budge.

"Do you really want me to die slowly? Or go through life, not being able to fend or hunt for myself??"

I thought about what it would be like for her if she never got the use of her hind legs back. She wouldn't even be able to stand let alone walk or hunt...what kind of happiness could anyone possible find like that?

I was in a trance of sorrow, and I bent down and gingerly grabbed her neck in my jaws...

She shut her eyes slowly.

"Do it..." She whispered, in a tone so intense that it was as if I had no choice. My jaws snapped down lightning fast on her frail little neck. She let out a last cry of pain, there was a snap, and I tasted the salty tang of blood on my mouth. I dropped her, as soon as it was done, barely aware of what I'd done. I took a few steps back. Her neck was bleeding like newly killed prey. I had killed her. Dawnfire was dead.

I dug my claws into the ground. Angry that I'd listened to her. I was too confused, I was too grief stricken. I lowered my head and wailed into the rainy world. I couldn't even tell if it was day or night anymore. It didn't really matter though. I may as well have been dead like the rest of the creatures on the territory.

Was I murderer? Was I a heartless killer? Or was I a friend? How could the line be so thin?

My legs gave out from under me, and I let my body fall limply to the ground, joining the corpses on the bloodstained soil.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

That night I had the same dream, where the golden version of me tried to speak, but a grey lion stopped her.

I woke to a paw poking me gently in the side.

"Storm?" I heard Hover's voice whisper. I didn't answer. I didn't have the will to.

"Storm!?" This time it was Feather. I had to answer him. Worrying Feather was something I simply couldn't do.

I slowly opened my eyes. I blinked them to get the sleepy blur out, and as the focused I could see Hover and Feather standing above me, worried faces staring down. It had stopped raining.

"Storm!" Cried Feather in delight, a cub-like joy shone in his blue-green eyes, even though he was much bigger than me now.

I didn't have the energy to smile up at him. I let out a sigh, and tears began to run down my face again.

Hover frowned.

"Storm what are you doing here?"

I tried to answer, but my words caught in my throat, and I just ended up crying more. I felt like a helpless cub. Why couldn't I just get a hold of myself and stop acting like an infant?!

Feather glanced around.

“Do you think Golden got away?” He muttered, half to himself.

“I hope so...” Hover said gravely looking around.

“Hey...I recognize that one!” Exclaimed Feather, running over to Dawnfire’s corpse. He sniffed it, “Yea! I did know her...she delivered messages for Storm when she was stuck in the dog pack...wait a minute. That wound...that wasn’t made from a Tall Baboon stick like the rest...” Feather whispered, his eyes opening widely.

“What?” Hover walked over.

“This one on the neck.”

Hover gasped.

“That was made by a lion...”

All eyes turned to me.

“Storm...you didn’t...?” Hover stared at me.

I couldn’t meet her gaze. I put my head on my paws and shut my eyes tightly, wishing it was all a dream.

I could hear Feather’s heavy paw steps hitting the ground as he walked closer to me. Accompanied by Hover’s lighter ones.

I didn’t look up, but I could feel their gazes burning into my pelt.

I sniffled.

“I didn’t do it to be cruel...” I said shakily.

“Why DID you do it?”

I took in a deep breath and told them what had happened the night before.

Feather immediately lay down beside me and licked my head soothingly.

“Storm...you did what you thought was right...” He told me, nuzzling me, “I know you’d never do something like this if you didn’t think it was right.”

I looked over at him miserably.

“But WAS it the right thing?”

He stayed silent, but licked the back of my head again.

When did Feather get so wise? It seemed like just yesterday that he had been a tiny cub, sitting between my paws in the pride. Asking me to tell him and his sisters about my scars. Or playing with them at the log I used to sleep in...who had known then that he'd grow up with me, with cheetahs, and not even know his own mother. The world played out in such funny ways sometimes.

Hover sat a few paw steps away. Her face was grave and brooding.

I finally sat up. Feather sat up too, sitting right beside me comfortably.

“Why did you leave the jungle Storm?” She asked, her expression was hurt.

She caught me off guard and I looked at her in surprise.

“What?”

“You just took off when I was gone. The one time I leave you alone you bolt. Is it because of me?”

“No! Hover, of course not!”

I got up and walked over to my friend. I placed my muzzle on her shoulder comfortably. She didn't respond to my attempts at comforting. She just continued speaking.

“I know you were supposed to go meet Golden at First Rain, but you could have at least asked us to come with you! Because we would have! You didn't have to just run off!” She exclaimed.

“Hover, it didn't leave because of First Rain, or Golden.”

“You didn't?”

“Didn't Thunder tell you?” The name ‘Thunder’ stung on my tongue.

“No...he said you just left...”

I could feel my muscles turn to ice. I stepped away from Hover to look her right in the eye. Feather was beside me again at this point, watching me curiously.

“Thunder is a murderer. He...” I couldn’t bear to tell them all the things Viraka had told me.

“What!?” Hissed both Feather and Hover.

“It’s...it’s a long story. I just...he killed innocent cubs and lionesses before his mane was even fully grown! I couldn’t be around him, I couldn’t be around the jungle, I just had to get away...”

Hover and Feather were both shocked.

“How do you know?” Cried Hover.

“His brother told me.” I didn’t mention that his brother was the one who had killed Shimmer. Feather had seen her death, and it might have upset him.

The two of them stood in stunned silence for a few moments.

“So...what do we do now?” Asked Feather quietly, “Where do we go?”

I sighed.

“Feather, you can join a bachelor group, and Hover...you should find a good pride.” I said grimly.

“What? What about you?” Roared Feather in panic.

“No pride would ever take me. I have to hope Golden’s alive and find him...or...live as a loner...”

“I’m NOT leaving you Storm!” growled Hover with hard resolve, and Feather looked at me like I’d suggested he go live with crocodiles.

“You two, you deserve better! You can’t stay here, wandering the Savannah, looking after me. You’ve got to move on with your lives...you don’t need me.”

“We can’t just split up like this!” Cried Feather, “I was separated from you once, and I don’t want it to happen again!”

“And I said I’d never leave you again, remember?” Hover added.

I was about to protest when another voice joined us.

“I know a way you can all stay together, and have a pride.”

We all turned to see a tan lion with a red mane.

A delighted smile spread across my face.

“Fire!”

Chapter Fifty-Nine

Fire grinned at me.

“FireMANE!” He corrected me.

“Oh that’s amazing! Congratulations FireMANE!” I laughed, running over to my brother.

Feather frowned. He had never liked Firemane. Hover looked confused.

“Who’s Firemane...?”

“He’s my big brother!” I told her, unable to stop beaming.

She smiled cautiously, and Fire returned her small smile with a huge, friendly grin. He’d changed so much since we were cubs. He seemed so much happier.

“You can ALL join my pride!” he told us, his voice jolly.

My eyes widened.

“REALLY!?”

“Of course! What kind of brother would I be? Leaving my sister and her friends out here when I have enough room for them! Sure! You’re all invited to join us!”

I nuzzled Firemane’s chin.

“Thank you so much Firemane...”

“What are you doing in dog territory?” Asked Hover suspiciously.

He looked at her oddly.

“Dogs?”

Hover frowned at him.

“Notice the corpses of DOGS.”

Firemane looked around as if he’d just noticed the full corpses, and discarded chunks of fur and flesh strewn across the ground.

“Oh. Well, I suppose it USED to be dog territory. We live here now.”

I blinked at him.

“But this territory is HUGE. It supported more than sixty dogs!” I exclaimed. He grinned giddily.

“I know!” He waved his tail in delight, “Come on! I’ll introduce all of you to my pride!” He bounded away toward the Pack Tree. I shivered at the memory of all the dogs that had inhabited it once. They were now reduced the tiny fragments of skin and fur on the ground. I cringed every time my paw encountered one by accident.

We arrived in Firemane’s inner territory it smelled strongly of lions, it was situated around the pack tree. Apparently the lions had their sleeping areas in the pack tree since it was so large and sheltered inside. It’d been so long since I’d been in a pride. I’d almost forgotten what sleeping areas, and inner territories were like. The quiet orderliness of being in one.

Firemane walked into the Pack Tree calmly. I wondered if these lions had discovered the secret entrance into the other side of it that the Mir and I had used as a hide out. I thought not. I wondered if I should tell Firemane. I didn’t.

He came out a few moments later, with three curious lionesses following him.

One of them was a very dark brown. She had bright, white highlights around her silvery eyes. She was truly beautiful, she had a black tail tip, and pale tan paws. She twitched her whiskers at me, her head held high.

The next was a creamy orange coloured lioness. She had a flame coloured tail tip – the same colour as Firemane’s brilliantly bright mane - and dark blue eyes. She had a bright,

happy expression on. I could tell she was younger than the other two by quite a few moons.

The lioness next to her was a pale creature. Almost white. Her pelt was tinted slightly yellow, she looked like a cloud, fallen from the sky. She had a soft yellow gaze, that seemed strained and nervous.

Firemane introduced them.

“These are half of the lionesses in my pride. The other two are out hunting. This, is Nightstealth,” he said, gesturing toward the dark beauty, then he flicked his tail to the orange one with blue eyes, “This is my daughter, Farleap, and beside her, is her mother, Softstep. Our Elder, Deepbite and my other daughter Quicksprint are after some impala by the water hole right now.”

Each of the lionesses greeted me. Nightstealth looked at me like I was an abomination to the world, and stuck up her sharply pointed nose at me. Farleap giggled and smiled at meeting her father’s younger sister, Softstep pushed her away before she could talk to me for very long, and greeted me with a guarded expression. Like she was holding her breath, afraid.

I shrugged her strange behavior off.

“Firemane...you didn’t happen to see Golden...did you?” I asked, petrified that he would say they’d found Golden’s body, killed by the Tall Baboons.

Firemane just shook his head.

“No...I heard there was a No-Mane staying with the dogs. I had no idea it was Golden! In any case, we came here days after the dogs died. I don’t know what happened to Golden. But I didn’t find a blood trail. So I think he’ll be ok. You’ll see sis.”

I sighed.

“All right...that’s ok.” I mumbled.

We stayed in Fire’s pride for a few days. Pride life was...strange to me. It felt so foreign. It was odd, I WAS lion. Shouldn’t I be comfortable living in a normal pride?

I wasn’t. I always felt on edge. I had trouble sleeping without the soft moss of the tree branch and the comforting height. I hated to admit it, but what I missed the most was Thunder’s snoring, and his company in the thick tree. I tried to banish him from my mind, but I couldn’t. He was Thunder. He had been my friend...it was so silly. I’d never

thought of Hover this much when I'd left the pride...had I? Why, was his smiling face there every time I closed my eyes? Why couldn't I laugh with out hurting inside, shot with the pain of knowing I'd never laugh with Thunder again. It was my choice not to see him again, but how could I? A murder of innocents? The Shadow Killer? So I was stuck dealing with my feelings, and trying to move on.

The lionesses didn't help me settle into pride life much either. They seemed more nervous than I did! Farleap often snuck away to try and talk to us. She ended up going to Feather a lot more than the rest of us. I smiled at the way she looked at him. He was a big, strong and handsome lion. She had a right to be interested.

But every time Farleap tried to come and talk to me, her mother would find some excuse to call her away, or nervously shuffle her off on a hunting patrol. She would act the same way around Firemane. I wasn't sure why. He seemed like a good enough leader. Softstep just seemed spooked by him.

One morning I was out walking along the border of Firemane's territory, when I scented a strange lion. I stopped.

"Who's there?" I roared.

A tan lion with a darker tan mane, and six toes stepped out of the grasses. His mane was disheveled and unkempt, his face looked worn and slightly crazed, but I recognized him.

"S-Sixmane..?"

Chapter Sixty

His hazel eyes shifted, looking me over. Recognition overcame them, but his expression stayed hard, and cold. The muscles in his newly scarred face were tense.

"Get away from here Hobblestep. This is between me, and who ever the mane of this territory is."

I gasped.

"Y-you're a No-Mane and...and you want to...?"

The hard determination in his eyes made me realize it was true. Sixmane...or...Sixtoes now, had been demoted to nothing but a No-Mane. And now he wanted to kill my brother, and take his territory.

“Sixtoes you...you CAN’T! He’s my brother! He-”

“I don’t CARE who he is. Life doesn’t revolve around you, cripple. Now get out of my way!” He roared in a very un-Sixtoes way. I stepped back. What was this hardness in his once soft, hazel gaze. Where was the well-kept, shy, sweet Sixtoes I knew? When I looked into his eyes, I didn’t get lost in them like I used to. All I saw was a dark expanse of anger.

“Sixtoes...what HAPPENED to you?” I whispered in shock. It was like looking at an entirely different lion.

“What HAPPENED to me? Well, dear Hobblestep, Dry Season happened to me! I don’t know where YOU were for the last few months, but I was here. My territory was one of the only ones left with water in it. No-Manes challenged me almost everyday. And I lost. My lionesses didn’t bother to say good bye, or even try to oppose the new mane. Life is NOT a soft, comfortable thing Hobblestep. You, above ALL should know that! Life is cruel, and it’s unfair. I’ve been alone for MOONS. I’ve seen my own cubs, butchered in front of me, powerless to help them. THAT is what’s happened to me. Now GET OUT OF MY WAY! Or I’ll FORCE you out!” Sixtoes roared, for the first time, I noticed how large he was. The way he towered over me, and his shadow completely blocked all sun from reaching my pelt. I felt afraid. Afraid of Sixtoes!

His once soft, almost cub like face was littered with scars that he’d fought with so many No-Manes, and probably from Manes he’d lost to in his quest for a new pride. His mane tracked twigs and leaves, blades of dry grass and dirt. His thick muscles had grown, making him bulky and threatening. But I couldn’t just stand by and let my brother and my...old friend, fight – quite possibly to the death.

“Find another Mane to challenge Sixtoes.” I told him bravely.

He looked at me in astonishment for a moment, then threw back his scarred face and laughed.

“I don’t think you realize how much of a fool you look like. You’re like a naive cub. Let me clear this up for you, Hobblestep, you mean NOTHING to me. I need a PRIDE. Not a pretty little cripple to toy with. So step out of my way or you’ll regret it.” He snarled, shifting his tangled, dirty mane, in a way I remembered well...a way I hadn’t been able to get out of my mind for a long time...the same movement, the same body, but a different lion.

Another melon who’s insides were scraped away, but instead of growing back like Hover was starting to, someone had poured dirt inside to fill the emptiness. I shivered.

“My name, is Storm.” I tried to growl, but it came out as sort of a whimper. How could I even try to be hostile to Sixtoes? I’d never imagined this moment happening...

For just a split second the hard, dark exterior of Sixtoes fell away, giving way to those handsome hazel eyes and soft features.

“It’s good that you...” he began to speak, in the tone I remembered, in the tone I’d almost fallen in love with. But as soon as he realized what he was doing, the mask was back up. He was back to being just another No-Mane, not Sixtoes, not Sixmane, not anyone. He forced a sneer onto his face, it didn’t seem to fit there. It just wasn’t part of his personality.

“I’m NOT weak to you. No lioness can just bend me to their will like those backstabbing Wildebeest-faced lionesses back in my pride. I WON’T let it happen!” He hissed, and to my disbelief the next thing I knew, his paw was swinging up, and tore across my face. I shrieked, and fell from the unexpected blow. I hit the ground in a jumble, my head hurt, I could feel a slight trickle of blood flowing down my muzzle. I shook it off, and stood shakily back up.

He was still wearing the same sneer, but I could see it was tense with guilt and pain. Why was he doing this? He was better than this!

“You’re better than this! What’s the point?” I cried, too shocked to bother trying to fight back.

“The point is to survive! The point is to have more cubs, to keep THEM safe! The point is...it’s...” he trailed off, the Sixtoes I knew coming through again, he looked so defeated. The world was more cruel than most gave it credit for. It transformed good lions like Sixtoes to just another dirty No-Mane...

I tentatively walked closer to him, he didn’t move. I rested my chin on his muscular shoulder. I felt him tense, but he did nothing. I slowly began to groom the dirt, and twigs out of his once handsome mane. He didn’t try to stop me. He just stood there tensely. When I finished, he looked me in the eye. His beautiful brown-green eyes were back to how I remembered them.

“Do you know how rare it is to ever know someone so...nice?” He asked, he looked deeply pained as he spoke, “I don’t think you realize how extraordinarily hard it is to find someone like you. You’re...amazing...” he breathed. I felt uncomfortably close to him, “Storm...come away from here...we can find some unclaimed territory. We can start a pride. I know YOU would never abandon me like the others. I know I can trust YOU.” His eyes were so hypnotic...

“Sixtoes...” I began, I didn’t want to hurt his feelings. I didn’t want to bring back that faceless No-Mane. “I have a mate-to-be. Golden. Remember him? He was there when I met you...” I told him gently. His deep eyes filled with hurt. The kind of hurt that made me hurt. The kind of hurt that made me want to do anything for him, to make the hurt go away, and replace it with the hypnotic passion that had inhabited them before. But the anger didn’t return. The No-Mane didn’t come back.

“Golden doesn’t know how lucky he is. I wish you’d stayed with me the first time I’d asked...I should have tried harder to make you stay...I don’t know what I said...or did... but maybe if you’d stayed things would have been different...”

I could feel my emerald eyes filling up with warm tears. He flicked a glittering drop of it off my cheek with his nose.

“I’ll stay away from your brother...and I’ll try not to let myself fall victim to... all this.” He gestured to everything around us, “If Golden doesn’t treat you like you’re a gift from the Savannah every moment he gets to spend with you – because that’s what you deserve... well...I’m always here...”

I sat about one paw step away from him now.

He stared straight at me while he stood up to leave – probably for ever.

“Remember...No matter what anyone, ANYONE says. You’re beautiful.”

And he ran off. I felt shredded up inside. It almost would have been better if I’d had to fight him. He left me with this big gaping hole inside me. With this horrible aching tear. I couldn’t WAIT until I found Golden. Golden would fill this hole...he had to. I let out a deep sigh as he disappeared, and stood up, I was going to go find Feather and Hover. It was silly to hide in my brother’s pride. Traveling would be easier due to wet season, I had to look for Golden. Finding him was the only way I’d ever really be happy.

Sixty-One

I walked through the pride territory. I couldn’t find Feather. I found Firemane though.

“Firemane! Do you know where Feather is? I really need to talk to him...” The way Firemane suddenly froze up when I mentioned Feather made me nervous.

“Feather? I haven’t seen him...”

I glanced around. I took in a deep breath. I caught a whiff of his scent.

“Oh, never mine Firemane. I’ve got his scent. Thanks anyway.”

Firemane froze.

“How about we go hunting? Nightstrike and Farleap are about to leave for a hunting party you could-”

“Firemane, you KNOW I’m not good for hunting. What’s wrong with you?”

He gulped. It made a loud sound. I cocked my head to the side.

“Nothing. I just thought you may have wanted to socialize with the other lionesses more...” He said through a locked jaw. Fire was a terrible liar. Especially to me. I wanted to pry deeper into what was troubling him, but he was a big Mane now. He could take care of himself. I followed Feather’s scent away, highly aware of Firemane’s dark green gaze burning into my pelt.

I climbed up past the pack tree. His scent led to an area with many bushes, and exceptionally tall grass, so much so that it was taller than me, and I had to keep raising myself on my hind legs to get my bearings.

I smelled things unfamiliar. I stopped dead. I slowly moved through the grasses, dropping into a stealth crouch, and quietly stuck my face out where the grasses parted into a clearing. My eyes widened in shock.

Feather was there. He was in panic, his tail swishing from side to side. Five strange, dogs – not those of the Savannah... Tall Baboon dogs cornered him on all sides. They were big burly dogs. They had red pelts and thick shoulders. They snarled and snapped at Feather when he moved, he growled in frustration and fear.

Glittering in the harsh sunlight there was a Tall Baboon Watcher. Its yellow eyes were alight, barely visible in the sunny atmosphere. On top of it, sat two ugly Tall Baboons. They wore loose, pale tan coloured furless pelts that obviously did not belong to them. Their skinny forearms stuck out of the pelt they wore on their strangely shaped chests at the shoulders. A little bit of thinly spread fur covered them, but not much more. Their bare skin was pink. I couldn’t see their hind legs because the edge of the unnaturally glimmering Watcher was in the way. Their faces were like baboon faces, but more flat, and their noses stuck out of their heads, not in snouts, but ugly bulges on their faces. They had fur just above their small, ape eyes, and a mane of hair. One of them had dark brown hair, while the other’s was a paler blond.

I could hear their voices. Watching them, I could understand their words. Through the Predator's Tongue. The Predator's Tongue is a combination of pitches in sounds and body language that is readable by any predator to any other. These Tall Baboons spoke it, sloppily and hard to understand, but they did speak it. The body language part was a little neglected. They mostly spoke in pitches. I could still comprehend them though. The dark maned one, who as the larger of the two, spoke first. He had a deep gruff voice.

"Do you think this is what Burdie wanted?"

"Well...he said he wanted one with weird colours right?"

"Right."

"Well this one's red. I'd say that's odd enough."

"Right."

"And even if Burdie doesn't want it, we could always just sell the skin. I'm sure there's a hunter or a fur collector that would pay handsomely for a red lion skin."

"Right."

"But Burdie would pay better."

"Right."

"Well...load the gun then!"

"Right!"

To my horror, and Feather's as his eyes widened and his pupils narrowed into slits, the big dark maned one pulled out a Tall Baboon Stick. He was going to kill Feather! I watched him drop strange, sharply pointed blue things in it the shut it, and make a clicking noise with it.

My breath caught in my throat as he pointed it at Feather's helpless figure. He tried to fight off the dogs, but they kept him in place, their muscular bodies and sharp teeth driving Feather to instinctually back off from them.

"Give me that! Knowing you, you'll miss!" barked the light maned one, snatching the shining Tall Baboon Stick from the dark maned one.

He directed it back at Feather. This was my only chance.

I burst out of the cove of the grasses and jumped in front of the speeding thing that shot out of the stick. It pierced into my leg. I hit the ground, and panted, I glanced down at my hind leg where it had hit, it stuck out, its point stuck into me. I felt all fuzzy in the head.

“Storm!” Roared Feather.

“What the HELL?!” The dark maned tall baboon cried in outrage, “I’m getting out the REAL gun and shooting this little bugger to smithereens! Where did it COME from!?!”

He reached down into the Watcher that they sat in, but the lighter maned one grabbed his arm.

“Would you please at least TRY to use your brain? Look at this one! Can you imagine how much Burdie would pay for a lion with SCARS? He LOVES that sort of thing!”

“But Burdie didn’t want a female!”

“He’ll want this one! Look at her! She’s PERFECT! Knock out the red one too, and we’ll sell them both to Burdie, he’ll pay a FORTUNE for the scarred one AND the red one!”

The dark maned one hesitated. I took my chance, blurry headed; I staggered towards the Watcher that they sat in. I was going to attack them! I had to! These may even have been the same ones that killed Duskflame and Darksun’s pack!

Both of the stared at me in dismay, I leapt up, at them, and the Dark maned one grabbed the Tall Baboon stick and shot me again, this time in the chest, I slumped over in mid air, and whacked my head on the side of extremely hard Watcher. I slid to the ground, and I couldn’t get up. My vision was so fuzzy.

“How in hell did she manage THAT? There was enough tranq in there to take down a rhino! And she’s SMALL for a lion!” exclaimed the light maned one. I worked hard to keep my eyes open and my sense alert. I wasn’t going to let them take me...I couldn’t. I heard another lion running out of the grasses. Another shot.

“Can I kill THIS one?” Grumbled the dark maned one.

“No. No, Burdie might want this one too. Besides, look at the scar on it’s face, it looks almost like that lion from that movie...”

“Scar?”

“Yea, the one that killed the king. Come one, Dylan. Let’s load them up onto the truck.”

“You sure they’re all out cold?”

“Yea, yea.”

“I still don’t think Burdie will want THREE new lions.”

“Then we sell the ones he doesn’t want to somebody else, or just their skins. I don’t care. Now come on. Help me!”

I heard them hopping out of the Watcher. I wanted to get up and attack them at the last moment, but my limbs simply wouldn’t MOVE. I felt ape paws, digging into my pelt and tugging me across the ground. The last thing I heard was the horrified gasp of a lioness, and the pitter-patter of paws steps running safely away from the scene. Blackness overcame me and I felt my body go limp, then my mind give up trying to control it, and I fell unconscious.

Chapter Sixty-Two

I opened my eyes a few times. Hazily, barley waking. I was on something. The Watcher that the two Tall Baboons who had hurt me were using. I wondered why such a huge creature let them sit on it, or in it. It could kill them, so why would it abide their every whim? I remember hearing the snapping of savannah grasses under the round black paws of the Watcher. I remember not being able to move, but feeling, for the first time in my life, enclosed.

My entire life I’d never had a physical barrier around me. With the dogs, there were snapping jaws, but never something like this. Cold silver stuff that glinted in the sunlight. A mesh of it, it was like being trapped in hard seaweed. My toes poked through the gaps in the mesh and my tail rested lazily outside the enclosure all together, on the warm black surface that was on the back of the Watcher. I vaguely recognized the fact that Feather was in the silvery mesh thing beside me, and beside him was a slightly dark coloured lioness, she was mostly blocked by Feather who was closer to me. I could hear the two Tall Baboons muttering to each other, but was too disoriented to hear what they were saying.

The Watcher went over a lump, and my head flew up in the air, and smashed down on the hard surface beneath, effectively knocking me unconscious again.

The next time my eyes opened I was off of the Watcher completely. I was deeply disturbed at where I was.

Every familiar scent I'd ever known was gone. I was chilled to the bone. I didn't recognize anything. Fear squeezed me like a python does its prey. Everything was white, but not like in the white place. There were huge solid walls that were the colour white, and a white floor beneath me. But the floor didn't have any dirt or plants on it. It was just smooth shiny white. It didn't smell like the earth. And the walls terrified me. Where were the wide open space? What unearathly place was this, that there was absolutely no sky or trees or grass. No expanse of places to go, just closed, quite white. With its dead floor and its constricting walls and ceiling. I was above the floor, on something made of the shiny silver stuff. It was cold, and I longed to jump off of it. But I couldn't move. The most I could do was move my mouth, but I decided against making any noise.

My gaze slid around to see Tall Baboons all around. Three of them were in the eerie white, and there were two more who were in darker pelts. One was in a dark blue one with lighter blue stripes, and a bright orange vine-like thing on it's neck. The other was in black, with a similar vine-like pelt on its neck that was also black. Underneath it had a light blue pelt, layers of pelt. The one in black had a very short brown mane, and wore chunks of what looked like see-through rock over it's brown eyes. It was tall and very skinny, its ape hands clutched a stick that scribbled over a white thing in it's other hand. The other one, in blue was shorter, and stocky. It was over fed and had almost no mane at all. Its dark brown, almost black eyes stared into the Tall Baboon in white that stood before it.

One of the Tall Baboons in white stood in front of the other two, it was the one the Tall Baboon in blue was staring at. It looked to be their leader. It was tall, but not quite so much as the one in black. It had a short black mane, and blue eyes. It glared at the short one in blue.

"Well can you fix it or not?" Grumbled the short one in blue, to the leader of the ones in white.

"Fix it?" The white one asked icily.

"If it's lame, I don't want it. How am I supposed to pass off a lion that limps as tough? Now, I bought this lion from those two bimbos thinking I was getting my money's worth! Can you fix it or not?"

"Mr. Baily, I-"

The one with the stick stopped scribbling and looked up,

“Mr. Baily prefers to be referred to by his first name.” It informed the one in white, pushing the see-through stones on its face up its nose, then went back to scribbling something.

“Hubert-” The one in white began again, and was cut off again.

“I hate that name. Call me Burdie.” The one in blue ordered.

“Call Mr. Baily Burdie...” Mumbled the one with the stick, flipping to a new surface of the thing he scribbled on and writing more.

“Burdie.” The one in white began a third time, pausing to make sure no one cut him off again, “This injury is very old. The lion must have suffered it when it was an infant. The bones in its leg have actually GROWN wrong. You can’t just ‘fix’ it.”

“You saying you can’t fix it?”

“I’m saying-”

“Ah, ah, ah. Before you say what you say next, know that I’m selling this lion to the first buyer, if you can’t fix it, and they won’t want it alive.” The one in blue growled. The one in white stared at him hostilely for a few moments, but said nothing, “So can you fix it, Doctor?” prompted the one in blue.

The one in white sighed.

“It’s not as simple as that. To make this lion able to walk, we would have to re-break her leg, and check on her every day to make sure it sets properly, and even THEN it’s only a slim chance she’ll walk again. And the breakage itself could cause extreme damage to her all ready traumatized state. If we try to re-break it now, she may die of shock!”

“Just put it to sleep for the breaking.” Suggested the one in blue loftily.

“Sir, not to put down your hired men, but they put enough tranquilizer in this lion to bring down four her size. It’s a small miracle she’s alive even now. If we put anesthetic in her, she may never wake up.”

The one in blue looked bored.

“If it dies, then I’ll sell it to someone. There are people who would buy the skin of this lion. It looks...nice and worn. If they kept the head on, the scars on it’s face would add a nice touch to a carpet or a wall hanging. You see, good doctor, if this lion lives or dies, doesn’t really matter to me. It’s if I can make my money with it. Now, you do what ever

you need to do to fix it, or I take it out in the back and shoot it like the animal it is. Your choice.”

The one with the stick paused and smirked before continuing his writing.

The one in white gave a very long sigh.

“All right, Mr...Burdie. I’ll try to ‘fix’ her.”

“Good. I look forward to your results. They better be good considering how much this is costing me!”

And, with that the one in blue turned and walked out, followed closely by the one in black, who kept scribbling even as he walked out the door.

The three in white exchanged a few word then separated, and surrounded me. Three pairs of eyes stared down at me. I groaned in fear.

“Doctor, she’s awake.” Said a female with a long blonde mane and blue eyes. The one who had been talking to the darker pelt ones came to me then. He had a thin white pelt on his hands now. He ran his warm fingers down my muzzle.

“Shh, it’ll be all right girl. I’ll make sure you’re all right.” He told me, his words were soft, and comforting. I stared at him, pleadingly. Maybe if he looked into my eyes he’d know what I needed him to know. That I had to be let out of here, that I needed to find Golden. It was a well-known fact that Tall Baboons didn’t understand the predator’s tongue, but did speak it unintentionally.

He didn’t catch my message. He lifted his hand off of my face and addressed the other Tall Baboons.

“All right. No point in waiting. Laura, Sherry, hold her down, and try to keep her as calm as possible. We shouldn’t put this off.” The two females nodded and I felt warm hands on me. I heard the male, the leader sigh one more time.

“I’m sorry...” He whispered, and I knew it was to me.

Moments later I heard a snap. I roared in pain.

I fell unconscious again.

Chapter Sixty-Three

The next time I awoke I was in a different place. Though it was similar. No open space, the space that was there was abruptly cut off by grey walls. I looked around. It stank. It stank of Tall Baboons, a lot of them. But the scent was stale, and I knew they were gone. It also smelled of unnatural food. The scent came from a square of tough spider web-like stuff that I had been kept in before the White Room. I couldn't see what lay past it. My side was pressed up against it, I realized. My dark tan fur poking out through the holes in the mesh. I gave a sigh, and tried to get up. I fell. My bad leg was HEAVY.

I looked down at it, and gasped in surprise. Instead of my leg, I saw a heavy block of white stuff stuck to it. I tried to shake my paw desperately in panic, but I could barely lift the heavy weight. Why was this there? Were they trying to torture me? My breaths came in short desperate gasps, and I couldn't calm myself. I heard a steady moaning sound escape my parted lips. It was more of an instinctual sound than anything with thought put into it. I was more afraid than I'd ever been. At least everything that had ever happened to me had happened in familiar places, with familiar scents and open spaces. I'd known where I was, I'd known what was going on.

But this place, it was alien. Nothing was familiar, nothing seemed real. What kind of creatures had the power to make so many places like this. So closed, so far from nature. Did Tall Baboons even come from nature? They didn't have their own pelts, but brightly coloured ones, they had manes, but no fur, what were these things?

"Hey, do you hear that?" I heard a voice ask. It wasn't the sloppy crude tone of Tall Baboons, but spoken perfectly clearly. This was the voice of a lion, a voice I knew well.

I stopped my moaning.

"Hover?" I asked quietly.

"Storm?" came my reply from through the wall.

"Hover!! Hover, how did you end up here?!" I cried, not sure whether to be overjoyed or depressed that she was trapped here too.

"Same way you were. I saw you and Feather out cold, and I tried to help...didn't work out...as you can tell..."

I stood up, dragging the paw with the white block on it over to the wall.

"Hover, where are you??"

“Another room. There are a lot of us in here. Why aren’t YOU here?! We were worried SICK! Crap, just now I sounded like your mom.”

I laughed, but my laugh came out hollow, tainted with the fear I couldn’t shake. I sat down, my shoulder hurt from holding up my heavy leg.

“Hover, I’m...I’m really afraid...” I whispered, I felt her pawsteps as she shuffled closer to the wall.

“Hey, don’t worry. It’ll be fine...you’ll see. We’ll get out of this...we’ve gotta.” She told me, surprisingly light heartedly.

I sighed again.

“Hover? Who are you talking to?” I heard a groggy sounding male voice from the other side of the wall ask her.

“Feather! Good, you’re awake. It’s Storm!” Hover told him.

“Feather!!” I called, wishing I could see him, to make sure he was ok.

“Storm!” I heard an excited reply, and his heavy paw steps pounded into the ground as he bounded over to the grey wall.

“Feather! Are you ok!?”

“Yea, yea, I’m fine, but what about you!? Why didn’t they put you in here? Where have you BEEN for the last week??”

“It’s been a...week?” I asked, haunted. How much of that time had I been unconscious?

“Yea...”

“I don’t remember it...” I said, my voice breaking in worry.

“You mean The Clarice hasn’t been at you yet?”

“The...what?”

“The lion trainer.” I heard another voice join, this one I didn’t know. It was a mature female voice, “Her name’s Clarice. She’s been pushing your friends pretty hard. I wonder why they haven’t started your training yet.”

“Huh? Who are you?”

“Name’s Crissy. It’s the name the humans gave me. I came here when I was a cub, don’t think I ever had another name.” Snarled the voice in deep contempt.

“Crissy, training for...what?” I asked.

“Hell.”

There was a silence.

“What’s a ‘hell’?” The words she used were confusing. What was a human? What was a hell?

I heard her snort, then felt paw steps walking off.

Suddenly the loud creaking noise of a door startled me, I hopped up to my feet, but was dragged down by the white thing on my leg, and ended up on the ground.

“Storm? Storm!?” I heard Hover and Feather through the wall, but didn’t dare answer. I was being stared at by the small over fed Tall Baboon. The one called Burdie. Behind him was the scribbling one, who still had his pencil and was writing madly. And behind that one, was the male that had been in white, the one that had soothed me with his voice, then hurt me. They walked in, in single file, and closed the door behind them.

“Are you SURE it’s safe to be in here, Axel?” The Burdie asked, putting a brown stick that was burning at the end into his mouth, and breathing out smoke.

“My name is Alex, but I told you not to call me by my first name. I am Dr. Wender ...and yes, Burdie, she’s harmless right now.” Said the one who had been in white before.

“What ever. How long until you can get it out of this individual room?” The Burdie puffed his burning stick.

“When she heals...that could be in weeks, or months. It all depends -”

“Stop right there. Dr. Weeder, I can’t afford to have this one lion taking up a whole space to itself. Not for another week, not for another month. Why can’t you just put it in with the other lions?”

“Burdie, that would be a mistake. The other lions aren’t familiar with her. They may turn on her while she’s weak, steal her food or-”

“It’ll just have to deal with it.” Said The Burdie simply. He turned to the scribbling one behind him, “Corby, make a note: Move lion with cast to other room today. And underline today. Twice.”

“Yes sir,” came The Corby’s quick response, turning to a new page on his writing surface and jotting down the note.

“Burdie you can’t-”

“Can’t. Don’t like that word. That’s a bad word. I’m an AmeriCAN. Not an AmeriCAN’T. Get it straight. Come Corby, let’s go.” He spoke speedily, and not even seconds after he finished his sentence, he turned, swung to door open, and walked through it, Corby following close behind. The door slammed shut.

The Dr. Wender gave me a regretful glance. In his eyes were words that he didn’t say. There was ‘sorry’, and a helpless look, I knew it wasn’t his fault. Whatever he’d done to my leg in the white room couldn’t have been his fault either. It was The Burdie. He was my enemy. I promised myself I wouldn’t forget that.

The Dr. Wender left, his movements rigid with worry that I couldn’t understand.

The following morning I woke up, with a comforting wreath of familiar scents, lion scents, all around me. I opened my eyes to see that on my left side Feather was curled up against me, and on the other was Hover. Two of my closest friends. I tried not to think of the third one, the one that was missing. Thunder. I yawned and looked around.

I saw several shapes of sleeping lions a little ways away. Several lionesses, and one male. The mane of this pride? Suddenly the male lifted his head. He looked over at me.

His mane was a brilliant shade of yellow, his face framed in a darker shade of the same colour, but a more orange tone. He had a pale, cream coloured pelt. His eyes were a rare color of turquoise. He stood up, and walked over. I had a nagging feeling I should know him.

“It is good you are awake.”

When I heard his voice something in my mind clicked. The yellow and orange mane, the strange turquoise eyes, but most of all his voice. I’d seen it all once before. And heard about it many, many more times.

Just one true memory of him. The memory was hazy from its age. It was from life times ago – or at least that’s how it seemed. I remembered the day, when I was a very young cub, he’d come to our pride. He’d greeted my father like an old friend, and then told us

tales of all the trouble he and Starmane – my father – used to get into as cubs, and the great things they accomplished as adults. Only later was I told of the amazing things he'd made happen on his own, only later was I told that I had met a living legend. The lion who stood before me was Sunmane, the so called king of all manes, the most heroic, and talked about lion from my youth.

Chapter Sixty-Four

THUNDER

I paced back and fourth, and back and fourth. My paws rhythmically hitting the moist soil and making the slightest thud. Why was I here? What kind of idiot was I? She wasn't coming back. I KNEW she wasn't coming back. So what was I doing pacing like a disgruntled warthog? There wasn't any reason for her to come back, and there wasn't any reason for me to stay here. I lifted my head, wishing that through the rain that covered the golden grasses I'd see her...coming back. Coming home.

I sat at the edge of the jungle, twitching my tail. This WAS her home. She knew it as well as I did. How could she leave it? How could she leave me? I felt so empty, I didn't feel like me. I mean, before she came I hadn't needed anyone! I'd visited Starya when I needed healing, sometimes I'd see Prix, but other than that I'd needed no one, and didn't have anyone. So why was I feeling like part of me had been torn out and dragged away? I ruffled my dark mane, and hung my head low.

Why hadn't I come out and said it right then? When we were sitting on the bank of the water hole...the world seeming to unravel like a snake from a vine as I looked into her piercing emerald eyes...I remember thinking, 'this, THIS is my chance. Say it.' Oh but that moment was so perfect...I couldn't ruin it by blurting out what I wanted to...I could just picture the way her friendly face would fall into an appalled or angry glare. Or...or SOMETHING.

Who was I kidding? What kind of lioness would want me anyway...I shook out my mane and scanned the rainy terrain again for any sign of her. Nothing. I sighed. If I had told her then she would have run to Golden, I know she would have. She thought of me as a friend and nothing more. But at least if she'd run then, she wouldn't know...Great Oblak, I thought that was behind me. I thought I was free. The only one who knew who I was, was my brother. Viraka, as he liked to be called now. That snake. That rat. That...that...I couldn't even describe the fury I felt toward him. I dug my claws into the damp soil.

That dirty little bottom feeder had ruined EVERYTHING for me. I shivered as I recalled the horrified, disbelieving expression that had oozed over her face as he told her. Me, how could I have done all that? I still remembered the dying screams, the way the blood felt on my paws, the way my claws slid through their flesh...but it hadn't been...me...I

hadn't been...well...it was me but...I growled, trying to get my thoughts into some kind of order.

When she had asked me if it was true, I couldn't lie, but I couldn't find the words to tell her the whole truth. I couldn't force them out of my throat under her terrified, and saddened yet angry gaze. Her eyes had hurt me that day more than any claws ever had...

Again, I lifted my head, having to shake sparkling water droplets out of my mane from the rain that made it through the canopy of the jungle. Nothing. I lifted a cautious paw to go forward, but I knew I couldn't leave. If I left the safety of the jungle...I knew I couldn't. For other lion's sake. I couldn't. I was trapped. I would have charged after her, I would have, but I couldn't. I pounded a paw into the ground in frustration. I wanted to see her. I wanted to build up the courage to tell her what I'd practiced so many times in my head...but she wasn't coming back. She wasn't coming back and I knew it. It killed me that she hadn't looked back, that she had seemed disgusted at my loss for words when she'd questioned me.

I heard light pawsteps behind me. Too light to be lion, too precise to be starya's, too quiet to be Prix's, and no one else would bother to come and see me but Gemma.

"Hey Gem." I sighed. I didn't look back at her, I knew I'd find the same sympathetic expression that had been there last time she came to see me. I didn't want to be patronized. I wanted to be left alone.

"Thunder, she's gone. Let her go. We'll all miss them, but it's time to move on." She said gently, stepping forward, and settling down beside me.

"It's not that I'm not moving on it's --"

"What, you like watching rain on the savannah? I know you Thunder. I know how you felt about her."

I twisted my head around, and started to object indignantly. She cut me off.

"I'm your sister. Well, closest thing to a sister you have, and I know these things. No lies between siblings." She smiled at me.

I gave up trying to deny it and just turned my eyes back to the open grasslands. I could see Gem's smile turn to a frown through the corner of my eye.

"Thunder! Come on! You've been down here for a week! It's time to MOVE your hairy butt and come back up to Starya's tree. I'll hunt tonight. My treat. Come on! I'll even try to get you a warthog -- your favorite!"

Gemma pressed her head into my side in an attempt to move me. I stayed perfectly still. I weighed more, and was much larger than Gem, even if I was small for a lion.

“You big lump! Move!” She growled playfully, ramming her head into my side again ineffectively. I cringed at the words ‘big lump’. Storm had called me that same name...

“Gem, I said no!” I mumbled, gently pushing her head off me with my forepaw. She looked up at me, and sat down a few paw steps away.

“Thunder please? I’m worried. Starya’s worried, heck, even PRIX is worried! And you KNOW what it takes to worry Prix. That leopard’s got nerves of steel he – wait am I rambling about him? You told me not to ramble about him. I’m sorry! I can’t help it sometimes! Sometimes there are just too many amazing things he does NOT to be said and I –”

“Shhh!” I silenced her babbling with a hiss, and pricked my ears. I thought I’d seen movement. It could have been a trick of the falling rain, but I was sure I’d seen a lion tail pop up among the stocks of golden grass then disappear.

“Oh, I’m Sorry! I KNOW you hate it when I go on and on about him, I didn’t mean to! This probably isn’t helping to convince you to come inland, it’s just I –”

“Shh!” I hissed again impatiently. She looked at me icily.

“Hey! What’s your problem? I was trying to apologize and you keep shhshing – ”

“SHH!” I snarled.

“No! I won’t shh! I’ll – Great Sunce what is that?” She stared over at a patch of grass that moved, with a flash of pale orange fur, which then disappeared again. I frowned over at her.

“Going to shh now, Gemma?” I growled, and she nodded embarrassedly. I kept my eyes trained on the now still grasses, billowing slightly in the breeze, and being pounded on by the heavy rains.

“Come out!” I roared, my voice echoing across the seemingly empty savannah before us, “Come out NOW!” I ordered, in a louder, more aggressive roar. Storm didn’t have a pale orange pelt, so who ever this was had to show themselves, then run back to where ever they came from.

I heard a rustling from a patch of foliage near by and stared at it menacingly.

“I’m waiting.” I snarled.

A young lionesses stumbled out of the foliage. Leaves, twigs and grass were caught in her drenched coat. She was a very pale flame colour, with darker blue eyes. She in took a shaky breath.

“Are you Thunder?” She asked, her voice quivering with fear.

I relaxed my muscles, but only slightly. My brother could be telling all the prides that I was alive. She may have been sent to find out for sure. I contemplated for a moment, whether to reply at all or not. What did I have to lose? Storm was gone. I’d never feel like my life was full until she was in it, so I should let them come.

“Yes. I’m Thunder. And you are?” I asked suspiciously, the young lioness shrunk under my prying gaze.

“M-my name is Farleap. Do you know of a lion called Feather? Or Hover, or...or... Storm?”

My eyes widened in surprise.

“Yes, I know all of them. Why do you ask?” I didn’t like the nervous and fearful expression she wore. She wasn’t afraid of me, I realized. It was something else. Something much worse.

“They need help. All three of them. They’ve been captured by Tall Baboons.”

Chapter Sixty-Five

STORM

I stared at him in wonder.

“Are you...Sunmane?” I asked, shivering in the air of authority he gave off.

He nodded his great head slowly.

“You are daughter of Starmane?” he asked, his expression searching.

I gazed at him in wonder.

“Yes...I am.”

He nodded again, a small smile at the edges of his black lips.

“You remember me?”

“Yes, I do. But I don’t know how you could possibly recognize me! I was only a cub when you saw me, and now with all these scars, it must be – ”

“There are other ways of recognition than site, for one thing you share our family scent.”

I was about to reply, when the voice repeated itself in my head, and my mouth just fell open and gaped.

“Wh-what? OUR family scent? You mean...my family scent...?”

He smiled calmly at me.

“No, ours. Starmane was my brother. You are my niece.” He told me, his eyes glinted with curiosity at my response.

“Starmane...he....had a brother...?” I whispered.

“Starmane was my older brother. He was always the sensible one...he kept me out of more quarrels than you can imagine...” Sunmane’s eyes drifted off into memory, then came back, harder, more serious, “But it is good that you are alive. Though, I wish I didn’t have to learn of your survival this way...”

I cocked my head to the side. I was still confused that I suddenly had an uncle, a famous one at that. And how had he gotten here? Sunmane had been killed by...I forced the name out of my mind and concentrated on trying to keep speaking to Sunmane.

“Why?”

“Because all of my cubs are gone.” He twisted his old face into a sad smile, “All of them were murdered, all but one, and he died...a long time ago.” He suddenly shifted his eyes. Was he lying?

“You’re last cub? Was he the one that the...um...killer...forced to watch...you know... it...” I asked, not sure how to word the delicate subject.

“Yes...” Sunmane sighed, “He was so similar to his mother. That cub had more loyalty that you know...I loved him...but...” Sunmane’s voice was thick with emotion as he spoke. I sat up, and supported his old body with mine.

“He sounds like a very good cub. I wish I’d known him.” I smiled encouragingly at the old mane. To my surprise, he met my sympathetic gaze with an intense stare.

“Oh, but you did know him.”

I stared at him oddly. Had this place driven the once great Sunmane to insanity? I’d never known his cub. I’d seen him once.

“I wasn’t fit to be a father to him anymore...not after what I’d caused. The murderer killed my family in revenge...and I knew he would be back for my last cub. So I took him to live with my brother...” Sunmane told me quietly. I stared at him. Then my eyes widened. His pale fur, his blond mane...his lightly coloured eyes...they suddenly looked very familiar.

It took me a minute to get the words out.

“S-Spark...?” I hissed under my breath.

Sunmane sighed.

I didn’t have time to feel shocked, or gape at him, for at that moment, an invisible weight seemed to hit my head like a rock. I felt the energy pulled from me, and fell to the ground. I fainted.

I found myself in the white place. Spark was there.

“Spark!” I roared. I bounded over to him, he looked down sheepishly, “Spark...you’re... you’re not my brother...?”

He shook his head.

“You’ve been...you’ve been lying, all this time?” I gasped.

“I...I didn’t want to confuse you, Sis - ”

“D-don’t call me that! Spark, why didn’t you ever tell me?”

“Because it doesn’t matter.”

I searched his sky blue eyes.

“If you’re not even my brother, why did you die for me? Why do you visit me from the dead?”

“Look, I’ve seen things...things...that you should hope you NEVER, EVER have to go through. That lion, that lion that you...you...BEFRIENDED! I wanted to tell you to get out of there! Get away from that murderer, that...that...” he stopped himself, “I saved you because I’ve seen too much death, and I had no wish to see anymore...”

“Ah, ah, ah, pet. You have no need to lie anymore. She’s in the Tall Baboon place, and she’s never getting out.” I heard a smooth female voice break into our conversation. A smooth female voice...that...sounded like it belonged to me. We both turned to see the golden version of me. The pale cream sun marking on her chest was oozing what looked like thick, golden coloured blood. Her muzzle was covered in a similar substance, but a silvery blue colour. Her emerald green eyes were smug and narrowed.

“What? I want answers, I want them NOW!” I roared, in sudden frustration.

“And now I can give them. Now that you’re out of the savannah, I can tell you anything you like. First of all, I’ll introduce myself. I’m Sunce. Goddess of light, the sun, warmth, dry season, and death.”

Chapter Sixty-Six

THUNDER

My muscles tensed in panic. I must have looked like an idiot, tensing up for an invisible enemy. I’d never seen a Tall Baboon. I knew they were furless, and rode on shiny things with glowing eyes called Watchers. I knew they carried magic sticks with them that could make the sounds of thunder and make you feel the pain of lightning. I knew that if they took you, you never came back. My heart beat fast, I felt like I could battle prides upon prides of lions to get to her.

“The Tall Baboons?? And she’s not dead?” I hissed, the petit lioness sank even lower to the ground, her eyes trained at my involuntarily unsheathed claws. She cleared her throat, and looked back up into my dark eyes.

“N-no sir. F-Feather got cornered by Tall Baboons with their sticks, and Storm tried to save him. They didn’t shoot them with lightning though! When they got shot, they didn’t just bleed like you’re supposed to! What came out of the stick were...were...pointy things, that were blue like the sky. They got stuck in their pelts and made them faint... Hover was with me, we both saw it! She told me to stay put, a-and she went to try to save them...she got hit too...I couldn’t go out there! S-so I ran home to my father, Firemane,

b-but he wouldn't help! He wasn't himself...he...he said he was sorry they were taken but there was nothing he could do...but there **MUST** be **SOMETHING**! I have to save Feather...I...I **HAVE** to!" The young lioness's eyes began to shimmer with tears, waiting to explode onto her face. I didn't know what to do! She was on the verge of sobbing her heart out and all I could do was stand there and nod. How awkward.

Gemma walked over to the lioness and nuzzled her comfortingly.

"Don't worry, we'll get them back..." She looked over at me inquisitively, "Won't we?" She asked.

Well, what I wanted to do was yell yes. I wanted to call it out for all the hear, and charge out into the savannah, and not to return until she was safe. But of course, there was...the things that had happened, and that I knew may happen again if I left. Oblak, why? Why me? I took a deep breath. I had to talk to him. Perhaps he would help me...maybe we could reach an agreement.

"I...I'll decide in the morning." I mumbled, and trotted off to find somewhere to sleep. Gemma stared at me as I left. I could feel her angry gaze burning into me. She didn't know that I wanted to go out there and rescue them as much as she did...but...it was...complicated.

I walked around the jungle, life was blooming everywhere. It was cub season. Young creatures' eyes followed me where ever I went. They had huge innocent eyes. Young leopards played together, giggling in high, carefree voices. Why hadn't I been like that when I was a cub? Why had I been so...so eager to please my father? And why had my brother and I never played like brothers should? I sighed, my life was so messed up.

I found a good tree to rest under, and curled up, trying to fall asleep as fast as I could. I succeeded.

My eyes opened into the bridge between the living and the dead. A place of pure white. It could be manipulated, I knew, by the gods, Sunce and Oblak. The dead could also use it, but it had to stay white for them. I sat down. Waiting. He came, his pure white pelt barley contrasting the colours all around at all.

"Centurion." I addressed him. He was one of the three ancient lion kings. But the only one that knew who I was, or rather what I was.

"Thunder." His pink eyes scanned me, "You aren't really thinking of **LEAVING** are you?" He snarled. I didn't flinch at his hard stare, "We had a **DEAL** you know Thunder. If you break your side, you know I can't do anything to keep mine."

“Please! I’m begging you! I NEED to find her!” I tried to reason with him, but his eerie pink eyes were already wearing away at my resolve.

“Thunder, Thunder, Thunder. You were BORN to be enemies. I’ve TOLD you that. Yet you disobeyed me. And it led to pain. This is why you should never disobey your master, Thunder.”

I twisted my face into an ugly snarl, my teeth bared threateningly.

“You’re NOT my master. Not now, not EVER. And, I don’t care what you told me! I... I...” I paused, closing my eyes, I needed to say it, I needed to, “I love her.”

Centurion looked bored and uninterested.

“You are Fallen Stars of different elements. You are of the sun, and she is of the rain. There is nothing to feel for her but hatred. Thunder, both your paths were all ready written. Sunce has been gracious, and given us, you, a better chance. A hundred percent chance actually. With no one to oppose you, the rising of the next king will go unchallenged, you will bring the old ways, the ways before prides back to life! It is your destiny! If you leave all that will be gone!”

“Then let it go. I never wanted this! The only reason I agreed to any of this was because you said you’d...you’d keep him out of here...” I felt like such a fool. But, if I went out there and He found me...innocent lions could die.

“And I have, haven’t I?” He stepped closer, “And if you leave, the other kings will no longer be blinded to you. When you were a cub, you spirit was young enough to go unnoticed by everyone but Sunce and I. But if you leave now, they will all know, that you are a Fallen Star as well.”

“And why should I care?” I asked him, in a low, serious growl.

“It will make it easier for the one you fear so much, that I protect you from, from finding you. You know what will happen when he finds you...”

“I can fight him.”

“You aren’t strong enough.”

“If it’s the only way to save Storm, I’ll FIND the strength to beat him. I won’t stay here, Centurion. With your help, or without it, I’m leaving.”

Centurion looked at me sourly.

“You are going to cause needless suffering in other lions Thunder. You’ll come crawling back to me when the death count rises. Then you will fulfill the destiny you were born into. Go on, TRY to go on your little quest. I won’t try to stop you. You’ll stop yourself.”

“You underestimate me.” I snarled defiantly.

“We’ll see.” He told me, in a sickeningly calm voice, his pink eyes boring into me.

Chapter Sixty-Seven

STORM

Sunce eyed me, and for a few moments, the only sound was the steady beat of the golden blood on her chest, and the silvery blood on her muzzle, dripping to the ground.

“Going to say anything, Storm?” She asked. Her honey smooth voice was mine...but...it was so much more confident and fluent. So much more attractive than my plain way of speaking... “Apparently not...well sweetie, I know you’re confused. So I’ll introduce you. You are Ulani. Fallen Rain Star, and my sister.”

“What? My NAME is Storm. And I’m NOT your sister. You died hundreds of years before I was BORN!” I exclaimed. Was this so-called God insane? She laughed, a beautiful, ringing laugh.

“Oh, you are so clueless, it almost makes you cute. A Fallen Star is a piece of a larger, more powerful star in the sky. It breaks up, and falls. The pieces can fall anywhere in the world, at any time. There are several pieces in each star, and they may be of different elements. Ours had three pieces. Two rains, and one sun. Oblak is the last piece of our star. You’re true name, is Ulani.” She explained slowly, as if speaking to a cub. I gulped. Spark stood tensely at my side. He flinched as Sunce’s eyes passed over him.

“Oh yes, you. I have no need for you now.” She said, matter-of-factly.

“W-what do you mean?” He hissed in a low, intense whisper.

“You know what I mean. It’s over, you’re on your own now.”

Spark’s blue eyes widened with terror.

“Sunce, no, no PLEASE, no, don’t-”

“Time’s up.”

Spark’s pupils narrowed into tiny slits and out of nowhere he let out a shriek of agony. He roared, his head tilted up, his eyes tightly shut, a sound of pure pain radiated from his mouth. He fell to the ground and writhed there, his pale mane tangling itself up in the struggle. He moaned and mumbled incoherently on the ground. I gasped in dismay.

“You scorpion! What are you doing to him!? Make it stop! Please! Stop it!” I cried at Sunce, running over to Spark’s side.

“Oh, I’m not doing anything. Not anymore.” She told me, her muzzle, which still dripped with silver-blue blood twisting into a smile that I knew would never take hold of my own identical face.

I could feel warm tears flowing from my eyes and I crouched by Spark, who didn’t respond to my attempts to calm him.

“W-what?”

“Come.” She flicked her tail, and the whiteness was gone, as was Spark. We were in the savannah. Dry season. I followed Sunce’s pale golden and cream figure through the grasses that had become so unfamiliar to me. I could make out more lions, lions I didn’t know. Sunce stopped a few impala-lengths away from the scene that I could make out more clearly now.

Before me was a clearing, full of corpses. Five lionesses and seven cubs laying on the ground in pools of their own blood. Each of them had crude, deep marks in them. This meant that they had been beaten to death, but not by an efficient killer. They died slowly, of blood loss. The claw marks weren’t those of a full grown lion. They weren’t as thick and deep as they should have been. That would mean a young lion killed them...I shivered in sudden realization. I was looking at Thunder’s younger self’s handy work.

Only one creature stood in the clearing who was alive. It was a tiny shivering cub. He had a pale pelt, and a pitifully small puff of even paler yellow fur on his tail, his mane hadn’t even begun to grow in a little yet. I recognized him right away. Spark. I could see that his sky blue eyes were empty and cold. They were so horror stricken that they showed nothing at all anymore. His shivering grew more violent, and he sat down. He looked into the darkening sky.

“Great Savannah...please...if anyone can hear me...I can’t be brave like Daddy would want me to...I can’t! Please...I...I don’t want to feel hurt...make the hurt go away...” He rasped, his high pitched cub voice wavered in pleading and panic.

Suddenly, the figure of Sunce herself appeared in front of him. I looked over at my Sunce, she was still crouching in the grasses, observing. The Sunce who appeared in front of Spark didn't have the blood on her.

Maybe this is the past... I thought to myself. I watched intently.

"Oh, my poor darling!" She exclaimed. Spark, just noticing her, stood up in horror.

"Wh-who are you?"

"Why, I'm what you think of as the Savannah. I'm Sunce."

Spark wiped his paw over his tear stained face.

"What do you want?"

"Only to help you little darling." She said, in a sickly sweet voice.

"What?"

"You heard me right. I can't very well sit up there and just LET you suffer can I? Oh, no, no, no! I can't do that. I had to come down and help my little Spark."

"How do you know my name?" He sniffled.

"Because I know everything little dear. I also know what you want. You don't want to feel all these yucky emotions do you my little songbird?"

Spark sniffled again and shook his head sadly.

"I don't want to see it every time I close my eyes! I want to be brave like Daddy would be...but...I can't..." He began to cry again. Sunce twisted her face into a sympathetic frown, she curled up beside the little cub comfortingly. He leaned into her, his shivering slowing. And suddenly it stopped. He pulled away from her.

"It's gone...I don't feel...I don't feel bad anymore! It...it's a miracle!" He exclaimed, his face spreading into a smile. The smile I'd known when I was a cub with him.

"See? Isn't it nice?"

"Yes! Yes! Yes, Miss Sunce! How did you make it go away?" He ran and pounced on a falling leaf, jumping right over the bodies of his family to get to it, and not even seeming to notice.

“Oh, it doesn’t matter little one. What matters is that it’s better.”

“Yes it is better! It is!” He grinned at her, suddenly his grin disappeared and he seemed to visibly shrink, “N-no! Miss Sunce! Please, it’s coming back! Make it go away again...”

“I can make it go away for a very, very long time if you do me a little favor...”

“H-huh?” He stammered, still seeming to shrivel up from the dark emotions re-entering his body.

“Well, sweetie, nothing’s free. I can’t just do this to every cub. You need to do your aunty Sunce a favor. Can you do that?”

“Yes! Yes, I can do anything! Just please get it away!”

“Good,” Sunce smiled and Spark straightened, the smile returning to his face, “I need you to do everything you can to keep a cub I know safe, can you do that?”

“Yes! Yes I can! I can do ANYTHING for YOU Miss Sunce!”

“Excellent!” Exclaimed Sunce, shriveling her nose in delight, and wrapping her tail around young Spark’s body, “I’ll make you my own precious jewel, my little Spark.”

And with that, she vanished. The world morphed back into the white place, where Spark still resided, quieter, but still writhing on the ground.

“The pathetic lion you see before you, has never felt any kind of pain. Not since he was a cub. It has all been storing. And when I lifted my spell, it all came converging down on the poor thing.” She frowned at Spark’s terrified body, shivering and twitching on the ground, eyes too widely plastered open.

“T-then put the spell back on!” I cried.

“Don’t you UNDERSTAND? He has been LYING to you! He isn’t your brother, and he hasn’t done any of the things he’s done for you out of love! He’s done them because I made him! ME! You should be loyal to me NOT him! I’M your sister, Ulani!” She roared at me, seemingly frustrated, “Why don’t you have these feelings for ME? I am SUNCE! He is nothing but a sniveling victim!”

I glared at her.

“What do you WANT from me? Why are you making him suffer like this!?”

“I want your loyalty! I want your love as a sister! Why don’t I HAVE it?! I have kept you alive ALL OF THIS TIME!” She was screaming at me now.

“Why do you care so much?” I screamed right back at her.

“Because everyone else I’ve known has betrayed me, no one is loyal to Sunce. They USE me. But you, you are my sister. If I had a sister to confide in, I would be MUCH stronger! A sister to rule the skies at my side, I would keep her there for eternity!”

“I’m NOT your sister! I’m SPARK’S sister! Now HELP HIM!” I roared.

She stared icily at me, and Spark’s moaning stopped. He got up, and walked to Sunce, He bowed at her side.

“I serve you my queen...” He said shakily.

“Of course you do. Everyone serves me. Come. We’ll come back when MY sister is more ready to listen.”

“Yes Sunce.” Spark nodded and followed her away.

Chapter Sixty-Eight

THUNDER

Centurion’s image faded away, and I expected to wake up. But instead the world morphed into the open savannah. I took a step back in horror. Centurion must have sent me into a memory! Damn him! I didn’t want to be here...I gulped when I made out the shape of myself, my brother, and my father. My brother and I were just cubs, his deformed mane only beginning to grow in. My father was looking down at both of us, his intelligent green eyes looking both of us over.

No matter what anyone else said, I knew my father was not a fool. By the end, he may have gone slightly mad, but he had always kept his brains in tact. He was the most cunning lion I’d ever known, and probably ever would know. He had a dark brown mane, closer in colour to my brother, Viraka’s, than mine. Mine was a lighter tone, even a golden colour in the front, but faded to black by the time it reached between my shoulder blades, which is where it stopped. His wasn’t like that. It was a pure, dark chestnut brown. His pelt was a lighter tone of brown, a reddish colour. Many of his enemies called it the colour of rotting wood, others called it the exact shade of decaying flesh. He had a light tan coloured muzzle, chest and paws.

My brother and I both looked up into his eyes, ambition reflected from his to mine, and a disappointed and left out expression in Viraka's. I frowned, seeing that my younger self, and my father didn't notice his saddened stances and drooping ears.

"Thunder, you will come with me to tour the territory. I'll teach you how to mark your scent, and look for No-Manes and make sure no one but you and your lionesses are trespassing." He smiled adoringly down at little cub me, then turned to Viraka with a less than enthused expression, "You will stay here with your mother and the other lionesses. Come Thunder, let's go."

Little me nodded seriously and followed my father off into the boundaries of our territory. We left my brother, still hunched over glumly. He sighed.

"Why is THUNDER dad's favorite? He's not so great...I could be as good as him if dad would only give me a chance...life's so unfair..." he mumbled, kicking a rock and walking back to what I remembered as our inner territory. I glanced over at where my cub self and my father had disappeared. I looked back at little Viraka, and then followed him.

He trotted back to where several lionesses were sun bathing on a large, smooth rock that jutted out of the earth. The four of them were laying completely flat and care free on the large rock. A beautiful golden lioness lifted her muzzled and looked down at Viraka.

"Hey kiddo. What's going on?" She asked, her amber eyes looking down at him lovingly.

"It's nothing Mom..." he grumbled ill temperedly.

"Hey, hey, hey! It's not nothing! Come up here and tell your Mom all about it. No shrinking your pride duties. I'm your superior lion you know." She said teasingly. I remember that my little brother used to dream of being a pride leader, and had been obsessed with ranks. My mother used to call him 'Little Mane' because most cubs didn't think about their futures as manes at such a young age.

Viraka smiled sadly and walked over the smooth yellow rock. He crouched down and used all his power to give a huge leap to the top. He grabbed on to the top of the rock with tiny black front claws. He scrabbled the rest of the way up, and shook the dirt out of his fur.

Groans of protest sounded from the other sleepy lionesses as he picked over their restful bodies to make his way over to our mother. She smiled her quirky smile at him as he came to lie down beside her. She draped a large honey coloured paw over his very dark body.

“Tell me everything.” She ordered him. He looked down at his chubby paws. She licked the top of his dark head, “Go on.”

“It’s just that...well...everyone always seems to like Thunder better than me...I mean...I KNOW I’m not as good as him at hunting...or fighting...but...the least dad could do is NOTICE me...” He mumbled.

“Hey, Little Mane! Your father and I both LOVE you. All right? Your dad just has trouble showing it sometimes. Kay? We love both of you the EXACT same.”

“Sure mom.” Viraka pointed his crestfallen gaze to the ground.

“Hey, look at me kiddo. If it makes you feel better I’ll have a talk with your dad. He can tell you himself that he loves you just the same as your brother. Ok?”

“No! Mom! Don’t tell him! He’ll think I was being a whiny cub! He’ll hate me more...”

“He doesn’t hate you Little Mane! He just-”

“Shh! Did you hear that?” One of the other lionesses on the rock’s head snapped up, and she was scanning the thick grasses that surrounded them.

“Hear what?” My mother asked in confusion.

There was a snapping of uncaring, heavy paw steps. A few moments later a golden lion stepped out of the thick grasses. He shook pieces of debris out of his light brown mane. He smiled pleasantly at the lionesses, whose bodies were rigid with fear and defiance.

“Hello there. I am Dust, I’ve come to take over this pride.” He told them. He was young and naive. He didn’t expect the hostile reaction he got. The four lionesses slithered off the rock and approached him, glaring. They left Viraka, shivering on the rock.

“What makes you think you have any right to come here and INSULT us like this? You have no right to even LOOK at us, unless you have defeated Rockmane! You get away from here, or we’ll MAKE you leave!” Snarled a dark lioness in the pride.

But the No-Mane was undeterred. He strolled over to Viraka, who was petrified and couldn’t move.

“I’m supposed to kill the cubs right? Isn’t that what you do when you want to take a pride? I’m sorry, it’s my first time...”

My mother and the other lionesses ran over snarling. Mother took up a defensive pose in front of the rock where Viraka sat.

“You’ll not touch my cub! Now, as Quickscent was trying to tell you, you have no right to-”

Her calm explanation was cut short by the young No-Mane’s claws sliding through the flesh on her neck. She screamed and fell to the ground, bleeding heavily.

“No! I-I meant to get her f-face! I-I...” The No-Mane took a step back in horror as my mother’s blood reached his paws.

He had killed her by accident. Her death, the tragedy that had driven my father to insanity was...an accident? Caused by a clumsy No-Mane? Lions had died, been murdered, from his slip of the paw. A blow struck just a few claw-lengths off had killed her. Had he hit her where he wished to, I never would have been driven to the jungle...none of the things that I’d done...would have happened. I cursed this No-Mane, this, Dust. He had not only ruined my own life, but caused my father...and...and I... to cut other’s short.

Just then I recognized my father’s dark shape break through the screen of golden grasses.

“I heard a scream! What’s going...” his voice faded when his eyes drifted down to the growing puddle of blood. His eyes traced a direct line from the bloody corpse of my mother to the bloodied paws of the No-Mane called Dust. I saw my cub self appear at his feet. I saw the way I stopped breathing for a minute. The way my amber eyes – the exact same shade as my mother’s had been – widened in shock. I saw myself shrink down, and scoot behind my father’s thick well muscled legs. In the memory I had, all I remembered was voices. I had shut my eyes tight, but now, I watched what I’d missed so long ago.

I saw my father’s dark green eyes almost pop out of his head. I saw the way a shiver passed through his body. And suddenly he was bigger. The fur all over him was puffed up, and something was in his eyes, that was never there before. I saw the way the world came crashing in on him. I could almost pin point the second in which he changed from being my loving father, Rockmane, into the ruthless killer he was to become...the Shadow Killer.

In three brief leaps he had gotten over to the weak and clumsy No-Mane, and pinned him. Talon-like claws slid menacingly out of their sheaths.

“Why did you kill a lioness?” he hissed, his voice hoarse and angry. He pressed his paw into the No-Mane’s neck, tiny bulbs of blood bubbled from where the tips of my father’s claws pressed.

“I-I didn’t mean to! It was...I...It was a mistake! I’m sorry! Let me go!” pleaded Dust, struggling futilely in my father’s very strong, very deadly grip.

“Let you GO? A No-Mane comes into my territory, and KILLS the mother of my youngest cubs, before even challenging me and then begs to be let go? Do my ears deceive me?” He snarled, he pushed his hooked claws out of their sheaths more and the curled deeper into Dust’s neck. Dust began to make choking noises, “She was my FAVORITE!” The claws pressed deeper, more blood welled out of the holes, “She was the one I LOVED!” the claws were so deeply embedded in Dust’s neck that I could hardly see any of the black of them, just the white sheaths, “And I never even had the chance to TELL HER!” Rockmane lowered himself to be barely a claw-length away from Dust’s struggling face, “Do you think that’s right No-Mane?”

My father’s only reply was a desperate chocking sound from the lion he pinned.

“Neither do I.” He growled, lifting his head. For a moment, I thought he would let the No-Mane called Dust go. But instead, he dug his claws even deeper into his neck, then yanked his paw out, and a chunk of Dust’s neck with it. Fur, skin, muscle, fat, veins, everything. My father’s impossibly powerful claws closed over the chunk of Dust that it held, slicing it to pieces which fell to the ground, in neatly cut bits.

Blood exploded from the huge wound. The white of Dust’s neck bone was clearly exposed. Pieces of jaggedly torn out muscle and flesh hung loosely everywhere inside the wound. The three lionesses gasped in dismay.

“He’ll never make that mistake again...” Snarled my father, a new, dangerous light in his eyes.

“R-Rockmane...?” Whispered one of the lionesses. It was like she didn’t recognize him.

“Take the bodies away...”

“Rockmane...why...?”

“He killed her...”

“Rock-”

“SHUT UP!” He roared, a firey light in his eyes, he whipped around, and leapt onto the lioness who questioned him. He pinned her and bit down hard on her windpipe. Killing her as one would kill prey. Bloodless, painless, quick...

“Quickscent!” Screeched one of the remaining two lionesses.

“I said for all of you to SHUT UP!” Roared my father, his eyes were lined with veins, and he ran and attacked the other two lionesses.

I looked back at the young me. I was curled up in a ball, my tail over my nose, my paws over my snout. I remembered the way I’d wished it was all a bad dream...just a nightmare that would go away...it never did.

I looked over at Viraka, who’s eyes were trained on my father’s murderous actions. He didn’t seem able to stop staring, his dark blue eyes very wide.

When my father finished with the lionesses, he turned on Viraka. Ferocity still in his eyes.

“You. He wanted you. Why didn’t your mother let him take you? You don’t MATTER! You’re a useless cub. You have no useful skills, your mane is wrong, you are UGLY. You are...you’re an...an abomination to lion kind! You’re unloved, you’re unwanted! Damn you cub, damn you!” Roared my father. Viraka stared up at him, his cub eyes very wide, “Get out of here! Go fend for yourself, or die!” He snarled. Viraka stayed where he was, frozen in terror. “What are you WAITING FOR??” Bellowed Rockmane, mindlessly scratching at Viraka’s small shoulder. The force of the blow knocked him right off the rock. Viraka lay on the ground beside it for a moment, then slowly stood up, thick, deep cuts in his shoulder. He looked terror stricken then turned tail and ran.

“Thunder!” My father’s voice rang across the clearing.

“Y-yes Daddy...?” I heard my younger self’s meek response.

“Come. We’re leaving.”

I watched my younger self stumble behind my father. Into the horizon.

The world morphed for me to see every murder my father committed. Every pride we passed, he’d kill lionesses, just for pleasure. As time went on, his murders became more random, and more violent. He’d murder some with purposely bloody, but not fatal wounds, so that they could die of blood loss, or he’d have lions pinned, then manage to snap their front legs, making it impossible for them to live on. He’d even kill cubs if he saw them. He told me it was revenge. That all lions were wicked, and that they deserved to die. He told me that other lion’s lives were of no more value than the life of an impala. I believed him. I watched my mane grow in, or the short fuzz that was the beginnings of a mane. One day, my father left to find prey and never came back.

I found out later that they had sent ‘the great’ Sunmane to dispose of Rockmane. Or...as the local lions called him, the Shadow Killer. I’d loved my father. No matter what he did to others, or how mad he’d gone, he’d always treated me like a father should treat his son. He kept on giving me fatherly smiles when I caught big game prey, or gave a very good roar. He’d never stopped smiling good naturedly at the things I said, or the mistakes I’d make. He was always my father Rockmane to me...nothing else.

The memory played out before me. I watched how I’d become depressed, the way I’d wandered around the savannah, not sure what to do. But I’d been sad, not angry, not suicidal, nothing but sad...

Then the one night, my life changed.

I could see it happening. The memory that I was trapped in skipped ahead to when I lay down to sleep. I was almost ready to join a bachelor group that night. Almost ready to forget my past...but the dream I had changed all that.

I saw myself go to sleep, planning out how I’d find the right group for me to myself. The vision switched into my dream. I watched my younger self look around the whiteness of the bridge between the land of living and dead. Then the dark figure of my father appeared.

“Father!” I saw myself yell, running over to him, “Father, y-you’re dead! How is this... how is this possible?!”

“Thunder, it isn’t important. But now I can see you whenever I like. Thunder, you have to avenge me. Kill them. Kill them ALL.”

“W-what...? Wh-who?”

“The one who murdered me...kill his cubs, his lionesses, and when he has nothing left, kill him. Do it for me Thunder. Do it for your father.”

“Rockmane...what if what you were doing was wrong...? What if...father, I can’t kill anyone...I can’t...”

“Dare you defy your father!? I know what’s best for you! TRUST me!”

“I do trust you...I just...”

“You just WHAT?” he began to circle me, “You are a little weakling. You’ll never please me. You’re no better than your brother. Thunder, I was MURDERED. Why won’t you avenge my death? Settle the score. DO IT.” He snarled.

“I...”

“You WILL.”

“Father, don’t do this!”

“You WILL do what I ask Thunder. One way or another.”

My father started finding me in my dreams every single night. Repeating himself, over and over..his voice began to find me in the day. Whispering horrible thoughts. Whispering thoughts he’d have. Driving me to believe him. Driving me to close off my emotions, and to avenge him.

I watched myself find out where Sunmane’s territory was. I spied on it, for days. Keeping to the bushes, keeping hidden. Until the moment was perfect. Then I strode in, when Sunmane was gone, and all the lionesses were in the inner territory...they didn’t suspect a thing. They were confused at first. Asked me if I was lost...then...I couldn’t watch myself do it. I turned my face away, my ears laid back against my head. I knew that in the memory playing before me I was slashing away at the poor lionesses, I could hear their screams, but I didn’t want to watch myself do it...I didn’t dare look back at my younger self when I heard myself begin to speak. I knew I was addressing the one cub I’d left alive. I cautiously looked back over at the scene playing itself out before me. Blood was all over my young self. I was totally covered in it. I was addressing a cub a few months younger than myself, but I was hardly any larger than he was. I could see the dark pleasure I’d had in my eyes that the cub feared me.

“Tell your father to meet me in the Badlands in three days. We need to settle a score.” I hissed at it, in a voice that didn’t seem to be mine...the cub nodded, and I just left. I watched myself go. Still disbelieving that it had been me...my father could do things to my judgment...he...he was always in my head...

The vision morphed again, I saw the way I’d been consumed by guilt. Then to another dream with my father.

“Father!” I saw myself yell.

“Yes, Thunder?”

“I...You...I’m not going to do this...”

“Yes you are! You WILL, you MUST.” He roared at me, in the commanding tone I’d been trained to obey.

“I WON’T father! I’m going to meet with Sunmane, but I’m going to ask him to kill me.”

The vision flashed forward to the meeting I’d had with the ‘great’ Sunmane.

I watched my younger self pacing.

Sunmane walked calmly into view. His thickly muscled body shimmered in the sunlight.

“Who are you?” He asked, his turquoise eyes seemed hollow with pain. Both my present and past selves cringed.

“I killed them...” I heard myself admit.

“You’re barely more than a cub! This isn’t a joke!”

“I KNOW it’s not a joke! I did it! I’m a killer! I remember the last scream of your favorite lioness, Powerleap I remember how she called your name as she died. I remember killing your two other cubs, I remember leaving the pale one alive. I remember how hard it had been to pin down the black lioness, I remember the way my claws slid down the dark brown one’s flank. I did it! I did it, and I’m here...I’m here for you to kill me. I don’t want to cause anymore pain to anyone...please...”

Sunmane looked surprised. Then his face went blank, covered by a mask of emotionlessness. Then, he lowered his mighty head.

“Go.” Were the words he uttered.

“W-what?”

“Go. You have taken everything from me...but...that does not give me the right to cut a young lion’s life short...if you fear hurting other lions...simply stay away from them. But I will not allow myself to kill a defenseless cub...”

“No! Sunmane, I KILLED them! I want to die! I HAVE to die!”

Sunmane looked up, his eyes intense.

“You don’t have to do anything. There is always a choice. I choose to do the right thing. It’s what Powerleap would have wanted...no matter what wrongs you have done in the short life you’ve had, you have so much more time left to mould yourself into someone better...I won’t take that chance away.” He said with hard resolve.

We looked at each other. For a long time, no one moved, or spoke. The only sound, was the shivering of the grasses in the light breeze. Suddenly an unnatural snarling sound filled the air.

Sunmane roared, and sniffed the air.

“The Tall Baboon’s watchers! I can smell them!” Sunmane hissed.

We both heard a snap like thunder cut across the sky.

“No...they have their sticks...you must get out of here! You must run away as far, and as fast as you can! I’ll hold them off...”

“But...but...they’ll kill you!” I cried.

“Death is better than life with out a peaceful soul. I will never recover from what you have caused me, but you may heal, I know there is goodness in you. You were willing to die to protect others from yourself. There is a jungle near here, go to it. There are no lions in there. You may live in solitude. Now GO!”

I watched my cub self run. I saw myself run and run...until I reached the towering trees of the jungle. The tree line seemed to glare down at me. But I trekked in anyway.

I was immediately welcomed by a black faced golden leopard. He leapt at my young self, and pinned me down. I didn’t try to struggle against him.

“Ha, ha! Hiya! I’m Prix! Who are you? Why are you in MY jungle.”

“This territory belongs to you?” I said in a very serious voice, believing that this actually belonged to the young leopard.

“Pfft. Course not! You’re not very smart. Why do you have a funny fuzzyness around your neck? What’s wrong with your colour? And you have no spots!”

My vision of the past skipped past my first conversation with Prix. And straight into what mattered. My first conversation with Centurion.

It was in the white place again. He came to me.

“You need my help.”

“Huh?” I saw myself reply, my dark brow tipped tail waving.

“You’re father follows you. I can keep him out of here.”

“Y...you can?”

“I can. My fellow kings and I have total control over this jungle.”

“Wait...what’s in this for you?” I heard myself ask, I was so unusually serious and sharp as a cub.

“Oh, a smart one are we? Well, all I need from you is your help. I can make you great. I can make you loved...and you will have no more of him left to bother you.”

“A favor?”

“It’s...nothing. Requires almost no work on your part. We’ll get into it later. Oh, and my powers do not work outside this place. So you must never, EVER leave.”

I saw my younger self nod enthusiastically.

Then it had seemed so perfect. I’d never thought I’d want to leave, never face my father again. But now, I was about to break that promise...I would have to face the one I feared, and fight his influences...the question was...could I? Or would more lions die?

Chapter Sixty-Nine

STORM

I opened my eyes groggily. Hover was asleep beside me, and I could see Feather’s golden-red figure pacing back and fourth. I blinked the sleep out of my eyes and looked around. My new found uncle Sunmane was sleeping, surrounded by a wall of four worn looking lionesses. I stood up, resting my heavy paw that was covered in the white stuff on the cold, flat surface of the floor.

“Why do you need that cast?” I heard a high pitched voice ask curiously from behind me. I whirled around to see...no one.

“Who said that?” I hissed in a hushed tone. If I said it too loud someone would notice, or I’d wake Hover...and they’d think I’d gone insane!

“Look DOOOOOOOOWN, big kitty.” Commanded the bossy little voice. I mindlessly obeyed and found myself staring at a perplexing little thing.

It was clearly a feline. Though...none like I'd ever seen. The smallest of my kind I'd ever come into contact with was a serval. But they were still long legged, and much larger than the delicately built thing that licked her paw by my feet. She was a skinny little thing. White with blotches of dark brown tabby fur. She had a black tail tip and a black right ear. The white ear had a long, very noticeable tear in it. But somehow she still managed to look more dignified than I ever would.

"The name's Fay." She purred, cleaning her whiskers off with a pretty little white paw, "Anywho, so, what's with the cast?" She repeated her former question.

"The...the what?"

"Cast."

"Um..." I didn't want to say what again. I'd seem like an idiot. So I just flattened my ears and looked down at her awkwardly.

"Ah. Cast meaning thing on your paw. Ya know. This." She padded right up to me and climbed up to sit on my slightly elevated paw, which was covered in the heavy white stuff. She twitched her fine white whiskers at me, "Anyone home? You don't SMELL like the funny water, but you never know..."

"What...?" I asked, confused by this little creature's knowledge.

She sighed, "All right. Let's start over. Hi, I'm Fay. You are?"

"Uhm...Storm..."

"Good. You know your own name. That's good. That's a lot better than most of the bimbos here can do, I'll tell ya that much. They all call themselves 'Alli' or 'Crissy' or some freak job human name. But you know yours. Burdie wouldn't give you a name like Storm. He'll probably give you something like Medusa." Said Fay, talking very quickly, and casually. I didn't understand a thing. The little creature must have caught my look of confusion and sighed. "Sorry. Forgot you were slow. Right, you know the humans?"

"The...Tall Baboons...?" I couldn't think of what else she could mean.

"Yea yea. What ever. So, you know the fat short one?"

"Yes, yes. The Burdie, right?" I was catching on now.

"Uh huh. Burdie. He owns this place. He came here for a new star."

“A Fallen Star?”

“What? No, not a Fallen Star! What the claw is a Fallen Star? I mean a star. Like, ya know, oooo, ahhhh, famous. Al or... ‘Sunmane’ over there used to be the star of Burdie’s show, but now he’s getting old, and Burdie wanted a new one.”

“A new...star...?” I asked, trying to understand.

“Yes, new star. New big cheese, new lion every little three year old with sticky fingers wants to pet...”

“Three-year-old...?”

“A – uh...never mind. Anyways, so he wanted to replace Old Al, and he brought the show here to Africa to do some of Al’s last shows for tourists, and pick up a new Al. Then, suddenly three of you show up! Only one’s a male, and one has this big huge cast on and’s got all those scars... So I ask again, what is with the cast?”

“Um...well...I have a bad leg...I hurt it when I was just a cub. I’ve never been able to walk on it...then I woke up here with this big...thing...on it.” I frowned. How stupid I must sound. Speaking so slowly to such a fast speaking, fast paced creature.

“Oh! So they’re fixin you up. Well that’s great!”

“What...?”

“The cast is there to fix you, ya know. I’ve seen em before. You have em on for a few weeks, and boom, when they’re off, you’re healed. It’s like magic.”

“R-really?” I took in a sharp gasp of air. Could it be true? When this heavy white thing was off...would I no longer be a cripple? Would I be able to run...and hunt normal prey like any other lion?

“That would also explain why they don’t have ya on the funky water.”

“The...huh?”

“The funky water. It’s this stuff in the water they give you guys that makes you all dopey. Well, they don’t put them males on it, according to Burdie, makes them less frightening on stage. But all the lionesses but you are on it. You’re probably off it to give you time to heal.”

“All the lionesses but me?”

“Yea.”

I shivered. “What about the one lying beside me...?”

“Yup, yup. She’s on it.”

“What does it...do to you...?” All of my joy of the notion of being a cripple no more left me when I found out that Hover was on the ‘funky water’.

“Well...it kind of makes your mind go. Ya know, the lionesses go sort of loopey. Smiling a lot, and laughing a lot. Also makes em sleepy, and they don’t really care when you steal chunks of their dinner. They sort of stumble around when they’ve been on it long enough. It’s funny to watch...”

I gulped. Fay’s words were strange, but their meaning came across. The lions on this water seemed to...go slightly mad. Losing their minds little by little...I shuttered at the prospect of that happening to Hover.

“How long does it take for them to get like that?”

“Pfft, I dunno, Few weeks, months, depends on the lion really.”

“How do you know all this?” I asked, hoping she was wrong.

“I’ve been around this circus for a looong time. I used to be Burdie’s cat. Till he broke up with is wife the dog trainer Darleen. Then I reminded both of them of each other and they both didn’t want me. Sooo I kind of just stow away in the animal cages, steal food off the doped up lions. It’s a pretty good life I guess. But I’ve been here from the start. I know everything there is to KNOW about this place. Just stick with your buddy Fay, and you’ll do just fine here Storm. I gotta go.”

“Huh? Why?”

“The good doctor. See ya.” She hopped of my casted paw and slipped through the bars in the door of the room. I looked around again. Concrete walls, with a big metal door at one end, and a door made of bars at the other. I wondered what a good doctor was, when the metal door swung open. I saw two Tall Baboons, or humans as Fay called them, step into the room. I recognized them both vaguely.

One of them was the Dr. Wender. He was the one who had snapped my leg in the white room, and the one I’d seen talking to the Burdie. He was fairly young looking. He had a

short black mane and very blue eyes. His skin was pale, but he wore different coloured pelts.

The other Tall Baboon was a female. She had a long blonde mane, that was wound into tight curls. She had pale skin, with thin pink lips. She had a long, thin, almost bird like nose, but wasn't an ugly creature. Even though her features were sharply pointed, her movements and disposition seemed to be soft. I knew her face very vaguely from being in the white room when I'd first arrived. She'd been one of the creatures in white along with the Dr. Wender and another female. In her hand she held a long strip of thick hide. Attached to the end were connecting rings of metal.

"All right Sherry. Just put on the leash and we can take her out of here check her progress." Instructed the Dr. Wender.

"Yea Alex. I got it." She smiled over at him, and he smiled back sheepishly.

"I just - "

"You just have an unhealthy obsession with this lion." She laughed. Her words were insulting, but the tone she said them in made them as harmless as fruit flies.

A flash of affection glimmered through the Dr. Wender...or...the Alex's eyes. Was the Sherry his mate? She laughed again, and proceeded over to me. I flinched as she slid the cold chain over my head and pulled me to my feet. I grunted in displeasure and bared my teeth. Feather noticed and came running over from the other side of the room roaring. Hover stayed asleep.

"Big Red! No!" Cried the Alex, jumping in front of the angry lion.

I knew Feather could rip through the scrawny human in a single strike. My muscles went stiff in tension. Was I about to witness a very bloody death?

Chapter Seventy

THUNDER

I woke up with a start. My eyes darted around the scenery before I remembered where I was. I was out of the memories that Centurion had forced upon me. He was trying to scare me out of leaving. If he was desperate enough to try to scare me into staying, he must know there was a chance I could block my father out, I realized. I lifted my head up, and shook my mane.

It felt uncomfortably heavy and moist from the humid air. There was a thin layer of moisture between my skin and fur, and it made me feel slimy.

I shook out my mane again and stood up, stretching.

The jungle had a thick layer of fog covering everything. It made it look eerie. Not like home. Of course, it hadn't felt like home for a while...not at all since Storm left...I sighed.

Bowing my head I tried to steady my fearful thoughts. As soon as I left, there was a good chance I would become a killer. A murderer. That wasn't me, but...it was all anyone else saw. If I left, lions would recognize my description, I would be hated, and shunned. I would be safe nowhere. Not from myself, or anyone else. But I couldn't stay here. Not while Storm was in danger. She was my everything. I knew she couldn't ever love me back, but I wasn't going to ever turn my back on her...even if she wished I would.

I was about to go out and risk my life, and the lives of those around me, to save someone that must hate me. Someone that feared me. And, I didn't even know if she COULD be saved. No one had ever come back from capture by Tall Baboons. Not that I knew of anyway. It was a death sentence. The thought of Sunmane – the lion who had been sent to kill me, but ended up giving his life to save mine flashed through my mind. Tall Baboons were not creatures to be trifled with.

I heard a snapping of twigs as someone approached. I looked over, not lifting my head higher. Long strands of my mane obscured my view, but I could still see there was a black leopard standing before me. He had dark green eyes and huge paws. I was surprised to see this particular leopard.

“Arnos?” I asked curiously. He was one of Starya's three cubs. All three of them had been black. Each was unusually quiet. One, Prix's old mate Meeka, had been trampled by a herd of elephants a few months earlier, and her brother Arnos, had become Prix's best friend, as they shared the pain of Meeka's death. He almost never spoke a word to me, or to Prix for all I knew. Just a constant companion, always there.

The black leopard studied me silently for a moment.

“Hello Thunder.” He said. He had a smooth, calm voice.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, raising my head, locks of mane fell away from my eyes and I could see him better now. His figure half shrouded in the thick mists.

“You’re leaving the jungle?” He asked, his dark eyes alight with curiosity and... something else I couldn’t place.

“I...I think so.” I told him.

He nodded, then looked around at our surroundings. A bird called a long mournful cry across the silent jungle, then took flight, disturbing the mists, making them flow around gently. Finally Arnos spoke.

“I’m coming with you.” He looked me straight in the eye.

“Why...?” I whispered. He hadn’t known Storm, and as far as I knew, he’d never set foot out of the jungle. Why would he want to leave now?

“Tarot.” He answered thoughtfully.

“Tarot? Arnos, he went missing, a long, long time ago.” I hissed in astonishment. Tarot was Starya’s last cub. He had always been...strange. His pale yellow eyes had never seemed focused on life, but rather something, beyond it. Something none of us could see. He had always been muttering to himself, about something or other. We never could figure him out. But, the day after Meeka’s death, he’d disappeared, as if into thin air. Most of us had figured that he’d died, but his body was never found. But it had never occurred to me that he may have left the jungle. Why would he do that? Life outside was harsh, and inside the jungle was a much more hospitable place for leopards. There was never a reason to leave. This place was a heaven.

“But...he’s out there. And...he’s...he’s calling to me.” Arnos answered.

“What?”

“I...I don’t know! I can...I can FEEL it Thunder. He’s out there.” Arnos suddenly looked confused by his own words.

“Arnos, don’t do this...you can’t risk your life and go out there on nothing but a feeling. I know it...it’s hard. But...but your brother is...well he’s probably dead.” What I said burned my tongue, but I needed to say it. Arnos’ safety would be compromised if he left with us. We would be going to try to save Storm from Tall Baboons – the most dangerous creatures of the Savannah. Some of us probably wouldn’t be coming back.

Arnos looked stung. He and his siblings had been strangely connected. Their mother had saved their lives before they were even born, under, mysterious circumstances. Many said they were touched by the Gods. I couldn’t imagine how it would feel to have a sibling you were close to die – and not know that two were dead for that matter.

My brother and I had never been close. Viraka had always been bitter toward me. No matter what actions I made to be friendly to him, he'd always snap at me or just respond with a snarl. But Arnos, Tarot, and Meeka had been best friends all their lives. When Meeka died, and Tarot disappeared, it nearly killed Arnos. He looked at me intensely.

"I MUST find my brother. If he's alive, I need to find him. I promise, I won't get in anyone's way...and I'll fight with you to the death if I have to. If there is even a tiny chance we could find Tarot along the way...I'll do anything. Please."

I nodded slowly.

"All right Arnos..." I said, trying not to show that inside my mind, were images of a dead and bloodied Arnos, and the knowledge that I'd caused it. "Come on. Let's go tell the others that you're coming and..." I gulped, "And then we'll leave..."

Arnos' eyes lit up with determination.

We trotted down the hill and over a few mossy boulders until we found the others sleeping at the base of a wide tree with broad branches. Mist shivered around their sleeping bodies and I walked quietly up to them. Arnos followed, silent as a shadow. Gemma was curled up in a tight ball, pressing up against Prix, who was sprawled out lazily on the dew-covered ground. Gemma had snuggled herself right up against his chest and was sleeping with a huge smile plastered to her face. Beside them, the pale orange lioness from the day before was curled up and asleep, shivering slightly. Her tail twitched over her nose. One of her sapphire eyes opened the smallest bit. She glanced up at me groggily.

"Are you going to help...?" She asked, her voice cracked.

All the horrible things that could happen ran through my mind one last time.

"Yes. I'll do what ever it takes to save them."

Chapter Seventy-One

STORM

I saw Feather's body hurtling toward the two humans, and without thinking I jumped between. I don't know why. But when I saw his claws slicing through the stuffy air, headed toward their flesh, I knew I just couldn't let it happen.

I leapt between his big golden-red bulk and the humans. He rammed into me, knocking me to the ground, and causing me to accidentally slide into the standing human, the

Sherry. As the Dr. Wender called her. I groaned in slight pain and stood up, shaking droplets of blood from my pelt. I inspected my wound. It was small, and I was fine. Feather stood up too and ran over to me.

“Storm what were you THINKING!? I could have KILLED you!” He roared.

“And you could have killed them! What you YOU thinking?” I hissed back, gesturing toward the two humans, who were both cowering in a heap on the cool grey floor.

“They’re taking you away! What if you never come back? I was trying to protect you!” He exclaimed, letting out a dismayed growl.

“Oh Feather...” I nuzzled him on the neck affectionately, “I don’t need protecting from anyone. I can take care of myself...” Suddenly I felt something cold on his neck. I jumped backward in surprise, “W-what’s that, on your neck?” I gasped, nosing away long locks of mane to reveal a black, cold band around Feather’s neck.

“It’s –” Feather was suddenly cut off. He fell to the cold, hard floor in agony and roared, unsheathing and sheathing his claws in pain, and swishing his tail on the ground.

“F-Feather?” I shrieked.

I heard the noisy movements of humans behind me. I whirled around to see a tall female holding a black device. She held it out in her elongated paws. Her claws at the end weren’t clipped down to fit the shape of her fingers, like the other humans I’d seen. And here’s were black. She had a long red mane, which was tied up in a big clump at the back of her head. She was very slim, and I wondered if she was having a hard time catching prey. Her skin was pale, and her eyes a shade of dark blue.

“What are you two doing?” She asked, a deep feminine voice emanating from her full red lips. She was staring down at the Dr. Wender and the Sherry, who were still curled up on the ground, watching Feather and I in astonishment. They didn’t look away from us for a few seconds, when the Dr. Wender finally spoke.

“I-I was coming to get Emerald out for a check up on h-her leg.” He stuttered, and the Sherry held up the side of the leather thing attached to the cold chain on my neck. Behind me, Feather stopped moaning and writhing as soon as the new comer’s long finger left something on the black thing she held.

“You came into a cage full of untrained lions, with nothing but a leash and expected it all to turn out well?” inquired the female, her dark eyes very unimpressed.

“I-I don’t belive in shock collars. Or...or anything like it...” answered the Dr.Wender.

“Uh huh. Get you’re tree hugging so-called-ethics out of here before I get sick.” The tall female sneered, pressing down on the thing on her hand again, making Feather roar in pain another time.

I pressed my ears back against my head and roared at her pleadingly. This made her turn her sharply featured face on me.

“Why doesn’t this one have a collar?” She asked through narrowed eyes.

“I-”

“Oh so this is YOU’RE doing? Well listen – once it gets it’s cast off, it’s going to be trained like the rest of them. And when that happens, it’s getting a collar whether you like it or not. Got it?” She smiled at him sweetly after her bitter remark.

“Come on Sherry. Lets go.” Was the Dr. Wender’s only reply. He and the Sherry stood up – leading me along with them by the leather strip. I groaned in protest, but eventually let the two humans lead me out the metal doors.

We walked out into a too-bright place. There were tiny suns on the ceiling, giving off harsh rays of light that made my eyes sting. The ground under foot was smooth and shiny. It was cool to the touch. It was a clean white. Unlike the dark grey, rough ground in the place we were usually trapped. We didn’t walk for very long down the strange narrow passage before the two stopped abruptly. The Sherry stuck her hand into a flap on her removable pelt. Out of it, she pulled a smooth, thin, metallic object. She slid it neatly into a circular metal slot with a thin hole in it. She rotated the thing once, and then she pulled open a door I hadn’t even seen before. It blended into the wall – much more than the huge metal door blended into the cement walls in the place I was before.

“All right. Lets do this.” Sighed The Dr. Wender, running his hand through his short black mane. The Sherry neatly shut the door behind her and put the leather strip that had me on the other end down. She walked over to the Dr. Wender.

“Alex, I know you don’t like Clarice’s way of doing things, but it’s just something you’ll have to live with. Burdie hires who he hires. And she’s very good at her job.” She said soothingly to the brooding male human. Her curly blond mane bounced as she wrapped her for arms around him. He sighed.

“I don’t want to talk about what I think of that woman. Let’s just get Emerald’s check up done with...” mumbled the Dr. Wender. The Sherry pressed her thin lips up against his cheek.

“All right, Alex. So how should we start?”

“Uh...lets take the cast off.”

“Take it off?”

“Yea, we can just put it back on when we’re done. I want to make sure we are setting the bone in the right place. I don’t want to have a badly placed cast on her...and...”

“And have Burdie put her down?”

“Mhmm...”

“Should I sedate her Alex?”

“Yes...I don’t want her pulling anything funny when we take the cast off.” He let a tiny smile cross his flat, bald face. What ugly creatures these were.

I watched the Sherry walk over to a neatly set up table and do SOMETHING. But I was distracted from what by a small voice.

“Have a nice nap.” It hissed. I caught a flash of tiny white paws and knew immediately that it was the tiny cat I’d met earlier – the thing called Fay. I wanted to ask her what she meant, when I felt something stab into my shoulder. I tried to snarl in surprise, but the sound caught in my throat, and I was suddenly sleepy, moments later I collapsed. Yet again.

Chapter Seventy-Two

NOTE: I’ve changed a few things since this has been in the editing process. Hover is no longer in the circus, but back at the jungle with Thunder. So just...remember that. MMkay? And there are other changes I can’t think of right now that I shall tell you about when they are relevant. Oh, and since the earlier chapters are poofed, I can tell you what’s going on at the moment in comments. If you want.

THUNDER

I looked at Hover to address her. She gazed back at me with a careful, guarded expression. It bothered me. Storm must have told her what my brother had. She knew I was a murderer. I tried not to notice the way her light blue eyes burned into me like I had a second head.

“Hover, show us where they captured Storm and Feather. We’ll try to track down the humans from there.” I suggested. Hover nodded slowly.

“It’s a few hours walk out of the jungle. I don’t see how you’ll find them though. They’re long gone by now, and no matter how much the Watchers they ride in stink, no scent lasts forever, and their strange tracks will be gone too. Especially after all the rain we’ve been having.” She reasoned, her tone was stiff and very business-like. She almost seemed afraid of me. I stifled a sigh. What she said was probably correct, but truth be told, I didn’t have any other ideas. Before I could think of a response, Arnos broke in.

“I’ll know.” He said certainly.

Hover gave him a hostile stare.

“You’ll just *know*? Did you hear any of what I just said? THERE WILL BE NO SCENT OR TRACKS.”

“Calm down. I heard you perfectly. But I will know. Trust me, I just will.”

“Trust you!? This is my friend’s LIFE we’re talking about, and you think you’re just going to have a...a feeling and magically find her? No. This isn’t a game. Hobbs is in danger! We can’t just wander around based on a feeling some stupid leopard had. She’d be long dead before we got anywhere near her! We need a real way to find them...”

Anger swelled in my belly. Hover was being unreasonable. Arnos and his siblings had always been able to ‘feel’ things that touched no one else. Hover didn’t know that as I did, but I was angered still. How dare she show that kind of lack of respect to Arnos?

I narrowed my eyes at the shrill lioness, and bared my teeth.

“Unless you have a better idea, I suggest we let Arnos do what he can.” I growled. She glared and bared her teeth right back at me.

“Don’t boss me around just because I’m a lioness, you murderer. I have no reason to listen to you. I’m only here because I think it’s where Hobbs would have gone if I’d been taken. But that doesn’t mean I have to rely on any of you. I just want my friend back.”

I clenched my jaw.

“What harm is there in going there and letting him try?” I roared at her, growing impatient now.

She was silent, her eyes glittering with defiance.

“And her name is Storm.” I added. It hurt when Hover called her Hobblestep, or Hobbs. Hobbs was the lioness who had run away from me with fear in her eyes after my brother Viraka had told her the truth about me. Storm was the lioness I’d known. Calling her Hobblestep seemed demeaning to her memory. That cruel name had caused her so much pain. She’d never have told me, but I could tell. I wouldn’t ever call her that. Not ever.

“You don’t have any right to tell me what to call my own best friend. Her name is Hobblestep, you can’t change that. What ever stupid name you gave her, it’s not who she is anymore. Not now that she knows who you really are.” Hover hissed at me cruelly, then looked out toward the open savannah, “Follow me to where she was taken.”

With that she started walking. Not even a moment’s hesitation. Gemma and Prix stumbled after her, while Arnos and I followed more slowly. I took deep slow breaths.

“Innocent lions are going to die because of this.” A voice whispered in my ear.

I jumped in surprise and stared around. No one.

“Stop gaping there like a fool. No one can see a ghost...” Whispered the voice tauntingly, fading away.

A shiver ran from my tail tip to my ears. Centurion. How could he speak to me when I was awake? That shouldn’t have been possible...

Arnos stopped and looked back at me, his dark green eyes probing and concerned.

“Are you all right?” He asked, his quiet tone gentle, “Nervous about the world outside the jungle?”

I shook out my mane and tried to smile at him.

“Yeah, I uh...guess so. Heh...silly of me really.” I muttered, bounding over to catch up to him. We approached the tree line. Every muscle in my body was screaming for me to go back, but I forced myself on. I refused to be a coward. Not now. Storm needed me.

“Last chance.” Centurion’s voice hissed in my ear, I flicked it away. Arnos crossed over the tree line to stand out in the tall grasses of the savannah, for once it was cloudy and dark, the air humid. Destined to rain again that night. I faltered.

“Thunder come on. We have to get there before night fall.” Called Gemma over her shoulder. I took a deep breath and stepped out from the cover of the trees that had been

my home and safe haven for so long. It was time to go back into the real world outside the perfect bubble of the jungle.

Chapter Seventy-Three

STORM

“There has to be a mistake! That’s not possible!”

“I didn’t believe it either. I checked, and rechecked everything. All the machines are working fine, and the physical tests I’ve done on her all support this data. Look at them yourself if you don’t trust me.”

“No, no of course I trust you but...it’s simply impossible...”

The shrill voices of Tall Baboons pounded at my ears. Their words were so loud and obvious. Not like the quiet, subtle speak of lions. It was an unsettling thing to wake up to. Especially since I had a brutal head ache. I wanted the noise to stop, I wanted to go back to sleep and escape this nightmare. I snarled from where I lay on the freezing cold silver rock at the loud creatures.

Both of them quickly went silent, but only for a moment before bursting into another round of loud obnoxious speaking. I didn’t stop listening to them. I tried to block them out and get back to sleep.

“She’s awake. Let’s test it. I’m sure it’s right. I’m sure.”

“Sherry...if these findings are wrong she could hurt herself and Burdie would have my head.”

“Alex, even if I’m wrong, from the look of that scarring she’s lived a good chunk of her life on three legs. There’s no reason for her to suddenly forget how to do it now. This could be a medical phenomenon! If we wait to test it until it *should* be healed, we’ll never know if it was this early on. Please.”

I couldn’t drown out their shrewd voices and longer. Not after they said living on three legs. And then they were speaking of healing...they had my attention now. I lifted my head and opened my eyes to watch the one called Alex react. He started at his mate for a moment. The signals on his bald face were hard to read. Especially since Tall Baboon signals and lion signals are so different. Finally, he let out an over-exaggerated sigh.

“All right. Fine. Have it your way.”

“Oh thank you so much! Don’t worry, I’m sure I’m right.”

“Yea, yea. You’re sure you’re right about everything...” grumbled the one called Alex light heartedly, rolling his round, mostly-white eyes.

The female, the one called Sherry, hurried over to me. She got out the black leather strip of material she’d had before and attached the shiny metal part to another strap of leather that was all ready around my neck. She gently tugged at her end of the strip.

“Come here Emerald. Come down from there, come on girl, come on.” She encouraged me gently, as if she was talking to a cub. I growled quietly and shakily stood

up on the cold silver stuff before hopping off. I landed as I always did. With my left front paw off the ground.

The Sherry's expression lost some of its enthusiasm. I wondered why. The one called Alex, watched with his back leaning up against the smooth white barriers that were all around us.

"Come here Emerald, walk to me. Come on sweetie." She called to me more. With that ridiculous name Emerald. I sighed and walked over to her.

She frowned.

"I don't understand. How come she's still walking on only three legs? Everything checks out. She should be on all fours..."

"Maybe it's because her leg healing that fast after we took the cast off is completely impossible?" teased the Alex.

The Sherry whacked him on the shoulder and looked at my raised leg broodingly.

I looked down at it too. Why would she expect me to use it? It had never worked before, why would Tall Baboons make it any less painful to use?

I looked back up at the Sherry's now crestfallen face, then back at my leg. I couldn't stand to make her so unhappy. Monster or no, I never liked to displease anybody. I shut my eyes and slowly moved the paw downward. I watched the Sherry's eyes widen when it hit the ground. I took a deep breath and took a step. I braced myself for the sharp pain that had been there for almost my entire life. I waited to fall involuntarily to the ground because if it. But I didn't. I took another step. I didn't feel any pain at all. I took more, and more, until I was jogging laps around the small room, my paw steps smooth as water flowing over pebbles.

The Sherry let out a high pitched squeal.

"I told you she could do it! I told you! It healed in a matter of days Alex! Days! Look at her go! This is...it's incredible...it's unbelievable...it's...it's..."

"Yeah, I know, impossible." Muttered the Alex in response, staring at me with a look of pure and simple wonder.

Chapter Seventy-Four

THUNDER

I was soaked the bone. I stopped to shake my dark mane, then kept walking. The mud sucked at my paws with each step, seeping between my toes and making me feel overall disgusting. The first rays of the morning sun were peeking over the horizon, though one could hardly tell through the grey rainy weather. We'd been walking all night, and I knew everyone was growing weary and tired. I knew we would have to rest soon. I wasn't looking forward to sleep.

For one thing the ground was covered in a thick layer of mud and I was in no hurry to lie down in it. I felt like a picky lioness, but the idea of sleeping in the sticky ooze just wasn't appealing. For another thing I was certain I would have nightmares. I was

vulnerable to my father's vengeful spirit outside the jungle. When I was young his appearances in my head had driven me mad, and many had died as a result. I was determined not to let that happen. I was older now, after all. I had will power. But deep in my heart I knew that standing against his whispers of death and revenge was far more than I could handle for long.

We had to find Storm quickly, or lions would pay. The thought deeply disturbed me, but it was the truth.

I heard Hover's frustrated snarl from behind me. I held a healthy dislike for that lioness. Storm had often told me about her, how she'd been her only friend in a dark time. With friends like Hover it was no wonder Storm thought so little of herself. Unless Hover was only acting this way towards me. Which was a distinct possibility.

"We've been walking for hours, Thunder. This is idiotic. You're stupid 'lead leopard' can't know where he's going. *I* can barely see two paw steps in front of me! This is useless, we have to just wait out the storm then keep going. We have to find shelter." Hover complained.

"Arnos knows where he's going!" I snapped. I looked up ahead to see the dim outline of Arnos through the heavy rains. The wind blew my mane into my face and I had to keep shaking my head to keep it out of my eyes. Arnos was a few lion-lengths ahead, slipping every couple of steps in the mud with his head down. I looked behind me to see Hover glaring at me icily and Prix and Gemma behind her, their sides pressed together for warmth and their eyes closed against the rain and wind. I sighed. To sleep it was then.

"Arnos!" I called, the black leopard looked back, his green eyes tired, "I think we should stop and rest." I relented, while Hover gave a satisfied snort. Arnos nodded slowly,

"Yes, I think that would be wise..." he rasped, it sounded as if his throat was raw with fatigue. I called back to the others to halt and we went and sought out a thickly branched tree for the leopards to rest in. I wasn't sure what kind of tree it was, I was so unfamiliar about everything in the open savannah. Arnos, Prix and Gemma easily slipped up into the tree, their slender leopard bodies well adapted to climbing. I attempted to join them, but I was simply too bulky to even reach the first branch. I direly missed my tree at home.

As I attempted to leap up into the tree, failing miserably every time, Hover watched with a cool smile.

"You look like a fool." She whispered in my ear as she walked by me to find a spot behind the tree to sleep that was shielded from the wind. I responded to her with bared teeth, but didn't try to get up again.

I lay down at the base of the tree and curled up into a tight ball. The wind and the rain were relentless and the mud seeped into my pelt uncomfortably. I shivered, chilled to the bone. My only memories of the savannah had been that it was hot and dry beyond compare. This didn't exactly fit my memories. Despite my extreme discomfort, I did get to sleep eventually. Though it was not at all better than lying in the mud in a storm.

I opened my eyes to find a world of white. No. No, no no...I shut them. I didn't want to be here. I had to be able to get myself out. *It's only a dream, it's only a dream...* I told myself over and over, trying to wake up. Nothing worked.

"You look pathetic, Thunder." I heard his deep voice. No. I didn't open my eyes. I didn't want to look at him. I didn't want to be here, "Look at me Thunder." He commanded. I didn't move, "So stubborn. As you always were. But closing your eyes won't make me go away Thunder. I'm your father. Listen to me. Open your eyes – I only want to talk."

"I don't want to talk to you, Rock. Just leave me alone." I growled at him, my eyes still tightly shut.

"Stop acting like a cub, Thunder. Do you realize how ridiculous you look? What has life with those dirty leopards done to my son? Once you were strong. Once they feared you. Do you remember when they cowered at your paws like the termites they are? And now what are you? Now what are you, Thunder? Nothing. Nothing at all. Just another wandering no-mane. You do not know how much it pains me to see my own son spoken down to by that lioness that travels with you now. She knows who you were but still shows you no respect! How does that make you *feel*, Thunder? She needs to be taught a *lesson*, yes?"

My pelt bristled and I swatted him squarely on the mouth with my front paw. I opened my eyes and snarled at him ferociously, "I don't want to play these games with you father! Leave me alone! Stay out of my head! I won't ever hurt Hover – or anyone else. I won't be your plaything. So just leave me be!" I roared as loudly as I could. He barley twitched a whisker though the whole display. His amber eyes just looked at me with pity.

"It is *good* to have you back, my son." He smiled menacingly and then was gone. I woke up.

I felt stiff and my muscles ached. I stood up and there was a loud sucking noise as my belly disconnected from the damp soil. Dried mud clung to my pelt and made my skin crawl. The rain had stopped, and the sun was high in the sky. I looked over the savannah, I had remembered it being barren and golden with sun baked grasses glowing in the sun. But now it was green. Water flowed where just the day before there had been none, it was luscious and full of life. Wet season truly was a wondrous time.

As I looked at the scenery, I heard something from behind me. I turned around just in time to dodge an attack from a giant golden lion. He flew over my head as I ducked and into a puddle, he quickly picked himself up and was facing me, one side of him covered with mud and bits of dead grass. He let out a fearsome roar. I wasn't used to pride life or law. I just stood there dumbly. He paused and eyed me curiously, then roared again. I did nothing. I wasn't sure what I was supposed to do.

"Um...hello...?" I said, trying to stay passive. I wasn't keen on fighting the first lion I met. He stared at me like I had two heads.

"What do you mean 'hello'?" he asked suspiciously, his voice was deep and smooth. I flicked an ear nervously.

"What do you think I mean? Hello means, hello. Why did you attack me?" I responded.

“Are you not a no-mane?”

“I’ve heard that word before. A what was it? No-mane? Why would you attack a stranger just because he’s a ‘no-mane’?” I asked quizzically. I’d heard Storm talking about no-manes sometimes. I knew one killed her father. I’d never actually asked what one was for fear of sounding like an oblivious idiot. This male lion was clearly perplexed. He looked as if he was deciding whether this was all a show to get his guard down.

“A no-mane is a male with out a pride. They come to steal a rightful mane’s territory and lionesses,” he took a step closer to me, his golden eyes probed mine, “how is it you do not know this?”

“I’m...not really from around here.” I responded.

“Even so, how is it that a lion can go through his whole life with out an understanding of the simplest pride concepts?”

I heard Hover stirring from behind me. She twisted her face into a scowl,

“Thunder, what’s all that racket? You do realize some of us are trying to sleep, right?” she snarled moodily, with out bothering to open her eyes.

The lion in front of me pricked his ears in interest.

“Hover?” He asked.

He knew her name? How was it that he could know her name? Did all these pride lions know each other?

“Golden?” She asked, her blue-grey eyes opened wide, and she stood up to face him, “in the name of the savannah! It is you! Wow, Golden! Am I ever glad to see you!” She cried, waving her tail in delight.

This was Golden? The Golden Storm would always go on about? He was a giant lion, and looked powerful, but behind his eyes I didn’t really see much going on. Storm may as well have been in love with a bolder. The more I looked at him the more I judged him and decided I didn’t like him. At all. He and Hover began to talk excitedly to one another. I had a feeling she’d ask him to join us.

Needless to say, I was a bit put out.